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Walden University

College of Health Professions

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Walden University
2021

Abstract

The Lived Experiences of Avoiding Recidivism Among African American Male
(First-Time) Former Offenders

by

Jeff Hines

MFA, National University, 2011

BS, State University of New York, 1984

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Public Health

Walden University

July 2021

Abstract

The United States has a high recidivism rate within its criminal population, especially among men of African American descent. However, within this population, some first-time former offenders have used successful approaches to avoid re-incarceration. The objective of this study was to investigate how these first-time former offenders desist from crime and avoid recidivism. This was a phenomenological study, utilizing the Desistance Theory as a framework, to explore how these men survived the consequences of post-incarceration and remained crime-free. In-depth, semi-structured, open-ended interviews were conducted with six African American male first-time former offenders (age 25 and older) who were not on probation nor on parole in Georgia and South Carolina. These men had over 46 years and three months of prison time between them and, more importantly, a combined 89 years of dissenting from crime. Results showed that former offenders face multiple challenges, but some find ways to reinvent themselves as entrepreneurs, and desist from further crime. They are motivated by the freedom to live without the restrictions of a prison cell, and the ability to commune with family while taking advantage of the education and employment opportunities. They see themselves as "returning citizens" rather than former offenders, and as a vital resource for other newly released former offenders wanting to start a new, crime-free life. Large scale studies are recommended to hopefully lead to new policies and programs designed to aid in the successful community transition of African American former offenders. This would represent a significant positive social change.

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Dedication

This research is dedicated to the Lord Jesus Christ first and foremost. It is also dedicated to my wife Beverly Hines and all our children and their children. I must also include all those who encouraged me to make this possible. This manuscript is dedicated to Gladys Cox who always taught me to dream big (still love you Ma), and to Angie (Big Mamma) Bryant, who was a praying woman! Finally, this manuscript is dedicated to all the brothers and sisters who lived and continue to live and survive in Harlem, New York, particularly those who are from convict alley; your lives inspired me to conduct this study with the purpose of contributing to all communities. I remember Harlem, and this is for you. Thank you.

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Table of Contents

List of Tables	v
List of Figures	vi
Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study.....	1
Introduction.....	1
Background	3
Problem Statement	5
Purpose of the Study	6
Research Questions	7
Framework	8
Nature of the Study	10
Definitions.....	14
Assumptions.....	15
Scope and Limitations.....	15
Limitations	16
Significance.....	16
Summary	18
Chapter 2: Literature Review	20
Introduction.....	20
Literature Search Strategy.....	21
Theoretical Framework: Desistance Theory	22
Literature Review: Principal Elements of the Post-incarceration Experience	29

Self-actualization	29
Realization of Purpose	33
Challenges in Reentry into Family and Community.....	35
Finding employment	40
Mental Health.....	45
Behavioral Health	48
Self-efficacy	50
External Obstacles	54
Policies Affecting Reentry I.....	58
Policy Affecting Reentry II.....	63
Recovery Capital.....	67
Summary	73
Chapter 3: Research Method.....	75
Introduction.....	75
Research Design and Rationale	75
Role of Researcher	77
Methodology	78
Recruitment.....	78
Data Collection	80
Data Analysis	82
Trustworthiness.....	83
Ethical Procedures	84

Summary	86
Chapter 4: Data Analysis	87
Introduction.....	87
Setting	89
Demographics	89
Data Collection	90
Data Analysis	91
Evidence of Trustworthiness.....	92
Results.....	93
Theme 1: "Big Motivation”	93
Theme 2: "Challenges"	100
Theme 3: Living with "Community Criminality"	103
Theme 4: "Inside-Out"	107
Theme 5: "Support Groups"	112
Theme 6: "Holler and Heed"	114
Summary	117
Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations.....	119
Introduction.....	119
Key findings.....	120
Interpretation of the Findings.....	122
Theme 1: Big Motivation (Self-actualization, Realization of Purpose)	122
Theme 2: Challenges (External Obstacles, Challenges in Reentry)	123

Theme 3: Community Criminality.....	125
Theme 4: Inside-Out (Mental Health).....	127
Theme 5: Support Groups (Recovery Capital)	129
Theme 6: Holler and Heed (Self Efficacy?)	131
The role of Desistance Theory in This Study	133
Limitations	134
Recommendations for Further Research.....	135
Research on Vocational Training During Incarceration	135
Research on Financially and Psychologically Restricting Laws	138
Social Change Implications	139
Conclusion	141
References.....	143
Appendix A: Recruitment Poster	160
Appendix B: Interview Questions.....	162
Appendix C: Informed Consent:.....	163

List of Tables

Table 1. A Summary of Desistance Theory of Crime	26
Table 2. Successful Community Reentry Chart	52

List of Figures

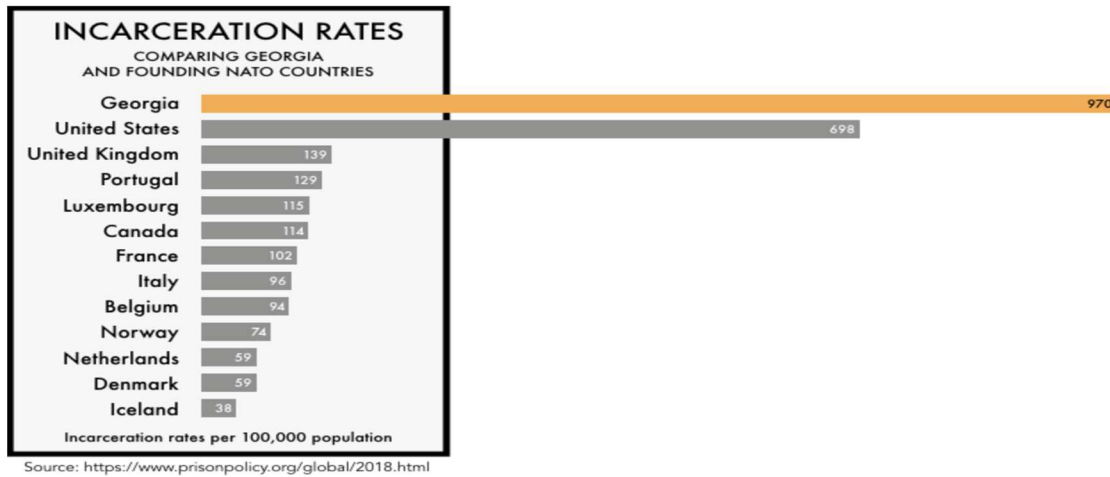
Figure 1. Incarceration Rates of NATO Countries Compared to Georgia	2
Figure 2. Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs	30
Figure 3. Behavioral Categories of Former Offenders Over Time	50
Figure 4. Following the Money of Mass Incarceration.....	64

Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Introduction

The growing prison population has become a nationally and a globally prominent concern over the years. There are 10.35 million people in prison around the world; most of them are adult males from low-income families and destitute environments (Rope et al., 2018). There were over 2 million people incarcerated in the United States as of 2016 (The Bureau of Justice, 2019), and over 6 million people were either on probation, parole, or community correctional supervision (Kaeble & Cowhig, 2018). According to Wagner and Sawyer (2018), each state in America still detains more people within the nation's prisons than the global prison population (for 100,000 people, 698 are incarcerated compared to the global prison population). As shown in Figure 1 below, Georgia, in this matter, stands out on an international scale in the census of 2018 because for every 100,000 people, 970 are incarcerated, which is a higher rate compared to any NATO country.

Although a large percentage of the inmates return home after serving their time, it is questionable whether the society, communities, and families are economically, holistically, and socially prepared to assist these released offenders in the difficult transition from inmate to former offender to returning citizen. Thus, the necessity arises to investigate more into the potential socioeconomic factors that influence the measures taken to facilitate a successful community transition for these former offenders in personal, communal, and federal levels.

Figure 1*Incarceration Rates of NATO Countries Compared to Georgia*

Prison population demographics are even more staggering regarding the African American population. Even though African Americans in the United States only comprise 13.4% of the population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2018), 37.5 % of the incarcerated are African American (Bureau of Prisons [BOP], 2019). Among other connotations, this statistic suggests that former offenders were arrested again, perhaps on more than one occasion for similar or new criminal activities after they were released into the community. This behavior of relapsing into crime, often after the person receives sanctions or undergoes intervention for a previous crime, is called recidivism (BOP, 2019). It is one of the fundamental concepts in criminal justice and is measured by criminal acts that resulted in rearrest, reconviction, or return to prison with or without a new sentence for three years following the prisoner's release ("Recidivism," 2014). Nonetheless, Bureau of Justice (2018) have found a 23% drop in recidivism rates in 23 states in the United States from 2005 to 2012. The National Reentry Resource Center

(NRRC) (2017) also shows that the recidivism rates in Georgia and Michigan had decreased by 35% (2007-2016) and 43% (2006-2015), respectively. The data reveal that some social programs and correction reform advocates are creating ways and means to succeed on a national level in combatting recidivism statistics. In addition, these statistics suggest that there is a population of former offenders who have successfully reintegrated into the community by avoiding recidivism. This marginal community remains a covert group of individuals who contributes to creating a better society as much as for themselves, their families, and communities.

Thus, the central focus of this study was to explore the measures taken by African American male former offenders to prevent recidivism in the state of Georgia. I attempted to uncover the lived experiences of the formerly incarcerated and the successful approaches they utilized to desist from crime after parole and probation. The results of this study could provide former offenders with additional tools to avoid recidivism and boost internal motivation to desist from crime.

Background

A successful reintegration into the society involves many personal, familial, and social factors. Identifying what these factors are and taking measures to resolve them are crucial steps in reducing the recidivism rates in the country. According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics (2016), on a national level, the rate of former offenders released and returned to the community is at least 10,000 individuals per week or 50,000 individuals per month. Bronson and Carson (2019) reported that 626,000 prisoners in 2016 and 622,400 prisoners in 2017 were discharged back to their communities after their time

served as inmates. The study indicated a decrease in the recidivism rate and highlighted that some of the former offenders either had unconditional or conditional guidelines upon their discharge. These guidelines involve some crime-specific or case-specific restrictions that impose certain limitations on who, what, and where an individual may frequent.

As the adjustment period can be challenging for the individual and the community, the reentry programs act as a rite of passage that most former offenders endure. Just as individual states and local communities have different policies on criminal penalties, each former offender reentry program varies. Currently, there are no specific national standards when funding reentry programs without being shuffled to other social services programs. Therefore, according to Wright (2018), a national rite of passage for reentry programs needs resources that feature paying more money to the correctional staff and officers who daily interact with the incarcerated and prepare the incarcerated for the reentry programs. The reentry programs need to foster relations with the outside world long before they discharge the inmates. Such relationships can be developed with the help of other organizations that aide in community reentry adjustments.

The quality of the reentry programs and their focus on the various challenges former offenders encounter in their transition to a civilian life play a significant role in community reintegration as well as in the prevention of recidivism. Muhlhausen (2015) concluded that the effectiveness of these reentry programs should center on the components of reintegration, such as housing, careers, substance abuse therapy, and mental health rehabilitation. As the reentry programs attend to these components, it is important to create innovative methods to address criminal desistance without exhausting

the existing methods. The literature discussed in this study have attempted to provide an overview of the post-release challenges faced by the first-time former offenders and how they were able to desist from crime. The disparities in research have only extended to further studies on recidivism but have not presented enough qualitative data on the lived experiences of African American male first-time former offenders who have desisted from crime. Therefore, in this study, I attempted to scrutinize the lived experience of a selected group of African American former offenders to discover potential new ways of desisting crime. Such findings may be useful for other former offenders to desist from crime. Moreover, they may help former offenders and their families successfully transition from incarceration life to community life, while also positively influencing the criminal justice reform policies.

Problem Statement

An overview of recent literature revealed some concerning facts about the incarceration trends of African Americans. Nellis (2016) reported that the national annual incarceration rate of African American male former offenders is 1,408 for every 100,000 African Americans. This is in direct contrast to the incarceration rates of Caucasian (275 for every 100,000) and Hispanic (378 for every 100,000) populations. Alper et al. (2018) also reported that African American males were 40% more likely to become recidivists after the first year of prison discharge. The same study indicated that there is a correlation between the percentage of former offenders who are rearrested, and the number of years passed since their release: within three years of freedom 68%, within six years 79%, and within nine years 83% were incarcerated. These statistics reveal the current state of

incarceration among African Americans. Even though a larger body of literature exists on the reasons for and methods of arresting African American former offenders, there seems to be a lack of research focusing on the positive experiences.

Former offenders endure numerous challenges upon their discharge as they work toward a successful community reentry and criminal desistance. For example, according to Roman and Link (2017), over 50% of former offenders are behind in child-support payments, which does not include other fees ordered by the criminal justice system after discharge. Although a growing body of literature further discusses the experiences of former offenders upon release (Alexander, 2013; Longley, 2019; Wyse, 2017), only a limited number of studies are centered on the detailed lived experiences of maintaining crime desistance behaviors and external obstacles that affect the success or failure of former offenders upon community reentry. Consequently, there emerges the necessity to investigate the successful strategies used to integrate back to the community and prevent recidivism by the former offenders who have spent more than a year after their release from prison. In this research I have focused on how these men were able to successfully navigate the internal and external obstacles and resist the daily influences of criminality while also dealing with the housing, educational, and financial challenges of living and fighting for criminal justice reform.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study was to identify the success strategies used by former offenders to desist from crime and avoid recidivism. Hlavk et al. (2015) reported that desisting from crime and avoiding recidivism are attributable to former offenders

reaching levels of maturity and viewing themselves not as criminals but as fathers, husbands, sons, ministers, and brothers. Therefore, this study explored how the participants arrived at their decisions to stop committing crimes, their internal motivations, and the external factors that led to those decisions. I investigated these key concerns through three specific research questions.

Research Questions

This phenomenological qualitative study intended to highlight successful strategies former offenders utilize to avoid recidivism and desist from crime. The overarching questions were as follows:

1. What is the lived experience of African American male (first-time) former offenders who succeed in resisting crime and avoiding recidivism?
2. How would an African American male (first-time) former offender describe his daily life desisting from crime?
3. What human agency determinants have changed with a crimefree lifestyle?

Subquestions

1. What is the process of a former offender desisting from crime?
2. What is the timeline for a former offender to cease from criminal actions?
3. How does a former offender choose to contribute to society?
4. How is having community support, family, and stakeholders a motivation to cease from crime?
5. How does the threat of recidivism and extended prison sentences serve as a motive to desist from crime?

6. How does a criminal lifestyle and gang affiliations encourage recidivism?

Framework

The theoretical framework of this study is desistance theory (DT). Maruna (2017) defined desistance theory as a time when a person grows up and moves away from criminal behavior; desistance is viewed as a way former offenders achieve a point where they no longer commit crimes (Graham & McNeil, 2017). Although Maruna and King (2009) indicated that there is an age-related timeline for committing crimes, the desistance theory presents a contrasting lens of former offenders as career criminals. In other words, desistance theory presents a format for the process of former offenders ceasing from crime, which is determined by positive milestones in their life, where they no longer desire to be labeled as career criminals. The former offender who chooses a different point of view in their life grows the desire to be a contributing citizen in the community either because of their children and loved ones, or due to seeing a difference in the community. This results in a metamorphic change in their life. Moreover, the former offender realizes the overall risk and dangers of living a crime-infested life and dangers of criminality as opposed to a criminal desistance lifestyle. The former offender views positive milestones (children, home, and employment) in their life as a day of reckoning and are not worth the sacrifice.

The positive milestones of a former offender's life encompass aspects of life that range from self-esteem to communal identity. McNeill et al. (2012) suggested that the DT investigation is an all-encompassing approach, focusing on communities, families, housing, health, age, and self-identification of former offenders. According to Robinson-

Edwards and Pinkney (2018), DT incorporates community networking, a profession, a trade, and academics. Therefore, when former offenders reach a certain level of maturity, they realize the importance of these factors compared to a criminal life (McNeil et al., 2012). For example, the unwillingness of former offenders to continue sacrificing their family relationships, education, and the threat of long-term prison time may act as motivators to desist from crime. This realization plays a main role in motivating the former offenders to desist from crime regardless of the number of years they spend after they have been released. However, one of the biggest challenges for them after reaching this level of maturity is to maintain the same motivation in an environment that persuades them constantly to relapse into a criminal life.

The former friends and acquaintances who still lead criminal careers can be identified as a main source of persuasion to become recidivists for former offenders. Edwards and Pinkney (2018) confirmed that it is a challenge for former offenders engaged in rehabilitation services to remain encouraged and cease allegiances from their past criminal careers. The researchers further explained that the participants had to resist gang-related actions to rerecruit them into an active criminal lifestyle. In order to overcome these external pressures, it is necessary for the former offenders to view themselves as overcomers of past criminological actions and conclude that those actions no longer perpetuate who they are now or will become (Leverentz, 2014). Finally, Polaschek (2016) reported that to legitimize the overall efforts of former offenders' successful criminal desistance, the behaviors of these individuals should include abstaining from criminal behaviors without reconvictions, parole violations, and

probation violations over extended periods of time. Thus, it becomes clear that the recently released former offenders who have decided to lead a life of criminal desistance are destined to face several challenges that could threaten their decision.

Therefore, the new former offenders need assistance from those who have experience in dealing with such challenges and who have been exemplary in desisting crimes since their release. There is also the need for an accountability entity that should involve law enforcement, social service groups, churches, and correctional staff geared toward helping the former offenders to desist from crime. This social change becomes a positive reflection on the society's eventual acceptance of former offenders and how this marginal group can contribute to the citizenry again in a beneficial way.

Nature of the Study

The study used a phenomenological approach. According to Van Manen (2017), phenomenology does not provide a generalized result based on outcomes taken from a traditional case study. Similarly, Lin (2017) explained that a sincere accurate part of utilizing phenomenology is to grasp the meaning of the participants' experience in a raw inceptive perspective. In other words, the approach allows the findings to reveal current keen details and ensures authenticity from the participant's point of view.

One of the best examples for the effectiveness of phenomenology is provided by Cassol et al. (2018). According to the authors, the narratives from patients who have had near-death experiences provided a robust synopsis about an individual event in multiple narratives. The outcomes of the study described at least 11 themes on self-reflection and

visual events that could not be expressed in words. This brief example offers an insight to what a former offender is more likely to encounter during their time incarcerated.

The emotional and psychological toll of the former actions and their repercussions are best revealed in the phenomenological enigma of former offenders who do not become recidivists. In a phenomenological study, Smith et al. (2017) focused on the psychological ramifications of having an ileostomy bag (a medical bag used hold body waste) as a result of colorectal cancer or inflammation of the bowels. The psychological result of the phenomenon revealed that the procedure had a major impact on the patient's lives and other people. For example, the patient had to decide if it was wise or when and how to inform family and friends. The patient's own image of their own body was altered, it was also challenging their self-esteem, coupled with shame and fear of public disclosure. Some of the participants had dreams of normalcy and how their lives were far different before the procedure. The above example corresponds with those psychological challenges that former offenders may face in relation to being released after several years of incarceration. They may be self-conscious of their body image (accumulation of tattoos), scars, clothing, gait, and community acceptance. The potency of participants' descriptive inner thoughts in a phenomenological study accents its rich and robust outcomes.

Alase (2018) pointed out that phenomenology is a participant-centered approach, focused on the inner experience of the participants in certain contexts rather than on the descriptive data from an outside perspective. Researchers are able to connect with the participants, and share their inner thoughts, feelings, and memories about the

phenomenon, free from judgement and classification. Hence, it provides a proper mechanism for exploring the everyday practical elements of the human experience. According to a phenomenological study by Eskandari et al. (2017), obtaining direct quotes from participants created an authentic outcome in their study on new fathers from Iran and how challenging it was for their parental readiness. For example, the participants shared the parents' subtle movement away from intimacy and the overt move to parenting because of a new child and the demands of parenting. Also observed were the maturation process of the father of a new child along with the responsibilities and unplanned events that occur with childbirth and rearing a child. The paradigm above provides evidence of what many former offenders can explain about their phenomenon of returning home and the struggle to avoid recidivism. Upon returning home after long period of imprisonment, the former offender may need to relearn the intricacies of fatherhood. Although, they may have corresponded through mail or had brief visitations in a sequestered, secured environment, once the former offender is at home a different level of parenting skills needs to be learned such as yielding to the caregiver in household matters.

The father's maturation process of creating a tranquil home must be more peaceful as opposed to what it was prior to his incarceration for the sake of the children. There may be a limited amount of reference points (positive paternal role models) available for them that show what a father's role entails apart from having a job. Therefore, the phenomenological approach provides access to the thought process of the participants based on their words, conversations, tone, and physical actions. Researcher's observations, journal notes, and salient questions as well as participant's forefront

answers (direct quotes) can create a trustworthy phenomenological environment whereas a case study perhaps would only provide an above-the-surface conclusion.

Although a case study approach might aid in identifying the complexity of criminal desistance and emerge with a generalized motif and patterns, the phenomenological approach offers the psychological concepts behind events. The genuine quotes or statements provided by participants in the phenomenological approach offer a broader perspective on the textual and structural components of the research, therefore, phenomenology is the best suited approach for this study.

I interviewed a pool of African American male first-time offenders of age 25 or older, who have been discharged at least a year or more. They have succeeded in staying out of prison after a single arrest. These participants were from central Georgia, which includes an area called the Central Savannah River Area (CSRA). I explored the mutual experiences of the participants as first-time former offenders who have successfully reintegrated into the community, desisting from crime. To gather data, I used semistructured open-ended questions that encouraged firsthand accounts from the participants.

A qualitative approach was adopted for the study as opposed to a quantitative or mixed-method approach. A quantitative approach would have provided systemically generalized results which would not have enabled me to obtain spontaneous motives and reasoning data. At the same time, the opportunity to receive authentic descriptions in a qualitative approach was much more vital than using a mixed-method approach.

Definitions

Desistance: The deliberate action of abstaining from reoffending and any reconvictions from former offenders (Polaschek, 2015).

Jail: A correctional facility for individuals waiting for sentencing, trial, or a transfer elsewhere by local authorities. Most state jails hold individuals for less than a year; however, states differ in policies (Bureau of Justice Statistics [BJS], 2016).

Parole: Individuals released from prison with the condition and regulation of a supervisor for a designated period. A parole board or mandatory release program, which sanctions discharge. If a former offender violates any part of parole, he or she will be re-arrested and will complete the rest of the sentence (BJS, 2017).

Prison: A facility run by state and federal authorities that hold felons sentenced for more than a year. Each state is subject to its state regulations in each prison (BJS, 2016).

Probation: An action in which former offenders are sent back to the community under supervision or given the choice of serving the rest of their sentence within the community (half-way houses) with other former offenders who have served short-term prison/jail times instead of long-term incarceration (BJS, 2017).

Recidivism: When a former offender returns to the community and violates probation or parole at any time and is re-arrested, convicted, and returned to prison/jail (National Institute of Justice, 2014).

Reentry: A widely used term that refers to former offenders re-entering the community after incarceration, which also involves the help of trained staff and services

that aid in the challenges/adjustments from prison/jail life to successful community life (NIJ, 2015).

Success: Succeeding in not returning to prison since their discharge from prison/jail and are no longer on parole or probation.

Assumptions

The following assumptions were made in this study: the responses from the participants are truthful; the cooperation of the participants during the study is without ulterior motives other than to help develop the scope of the research. Finally, the study surmised that there is a linkage between a decrease in recidivism and successful community reentry of first-time former offenders who do not become repeat offenders.

Scope and Limitations

I narrowed the parameters of this study down to African American males who, after a onetime prison term, did not become recidivists. They were off probation and parole and had not been rearrested for a year or more. The age range and the ethnicity of the participants were decided based on two factors: (a) Katsiaficas et al. (2014) suggested that individuals of age 25 and older have moved on from the stages of immaturity and are not making immature decisions without consequences. They are settling down, accepting responsibility for their actions, and maturing as adults; (b) Research discussed in the previous sections revealed the disproportionate number of incarcerated African American males compared to all other ethnicities. Therefore, the delimitation was African American male former offenders of the age range between 25 and older. The study focused on the effective approaches they used to remain free from recidivism.

Limitations

There were some limitations in this study due to the volunteer nature of participants and certain other parameters. A major limitation was participants refusing to answer some of the questions. Other limitations of the study included the lack of a diversified ethnic group and limited access to multiple means of contacting participants who are without current social media tools. The study also included snowball sampling, which allowed the participants to recruit other former offenders for the study who met the criteria. In addition, the study did not include women and limited the participants exclusively to African American males. I had no means of verifying as to whether the participants did not get rearrested or are habitual recidivists. I could only infer that the participants were truthful. Finally, the study did not consider the academic levels of the participants nor did the study address the reasoning for the former offenders' incarceration. The focus of the study was exclusively on how they were able to desist from crime without being rearrested.

Significance

The information discovered in this study can provide valuable information to different parties related to the lives of former offenders at different levels. The findings may help legislators distribute resources that create policies specifically designed for social, economic, and political reentry strategies. In late 1990s within the state of Michigan, the recidivism rate hovered around 30%, which was a significant drop from 45% in the early 1990s (Council for State Government, National Reentry Resource Center, 2018). These statistics, although high, show that there are former offenders who

desist from crime. There is a need to thoroughly investigate the relevant factors to determine what keeps them out of prison instead of only conducting research on why former offenders return to crimes. The research could persuade the relevant parties to offer continued support to the former offenders and diminish the chances of them becoming repeat offenders. In addition, the research can offer the opportunity to decrease the cost associated with crime and incarceration when changes are implemented. For example, if prior to incarceration the former offender was a viable employee and was in good standing with an employer, it is beneficial to the society if the employer rehires the former employee based on his good behavior. The incentive of this maneuver helps the community and is cost effective.

The data pinpoints the successful strategies former offenders cultivated after leaving prison to desist from crime. According to Martin et al. (2019), the potential contributions of former offenders desisting from crime are their individual self-evaluations. Therefore, such personal strategies successfully used by the participants will educate and encourage the other former offenders who persevere at the face of relapsing to crime. These narrations address their unwillingness to continuously sacrifice their families for a life of crime or an incarceration life.

Another potential contribution to desisting from crime is the development of self-efficacy and higher expectation for their future. According to Martin et al. (2019), implications of these advancements also have a positive effect on the community. For example, while they build their own future, the success of the former offenders desisting from crime suggests that they are resilient and can share their individual testimonies with

community groups and motivate youth groups to remain crimefree. This type of positive personal change can influence the community to assist and guide the former offenders to build local, political, and social credibility along with possible employment opportunities.

Finally, as a result of the data, investigators, legislators, social services workers, and corrections administrators can be more aware of the reentry obstacles. The outcomes of the study could enhance some of the collateral challenges of reintegration, such as finding housing, employment, and obtaining health insurance for former offenders. Furthermore, there is also the possibility to implement innovative reintegration of legislation and financial subsidies for former offenders. The results of the study may provide valuable information to lessen the challenges of finding employment, housing, and healthcare while encouraging continued substance/alcohol rehabilitation to help reduce the national recidivism rate.

Summary

Chapter 1 provided a detailed introduction to the research and covered several important sections including the background, problem statement, purpose, research questions, framework, nature of the study, scope, limitations, and the significance of the study. This chapter provided a background to the problem statement which is the limited number of studies that focused on African American males who did not become recidivists after their first and only arrest. There are many studies that investigate the reasons why former offenders become recidivists, but there seems to be a gap in research exploring how some former offenders desist from crimes and avoid recidivism. The disproportionate incarceration rates of African American males have influenced the study

to investigate more into those former offenders who have not become recidivists to document the successful strategies they use to lead a healthy community life after their first and only arrest. Thus, Chapter 1 clarified the purpose of the study, which is to provide information to legislators, social service groups, community members, and former offenders in a positive manner by documenting the positive social impact, trials, and successful community adjustments within post incarceration.

The chapter presented the overarching research questions that offered space to gather information on the lived experiences of African American (first-time) former offenders who did not return to prison or a life of crime. These questions were developed based on desistance theory, which provides an all-encompassing framework to examine the life of a former offender who has been reintegrated into the community successfully. Furthermore, this chapter explained why the phenomenological approach utilizing multiple sources of evidence is the best approach to analyze the narrative at hand. The commonality was achieved with salient questions to gain the textual and structural points of view of six participants with live coping mechanisms, survival strategies, and influences. The rich descriptions and thematic terms garner relevancies to the lives of African American male former offenders who desist from crime.

Chapter 2 presents a review of recent, published literature on the issues and challenges regarding community reintegration and criminal desistance during post incarceration. The review also focuses on studies that support the theoretical approach and the research design of this study.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

The literature published on post incarceration and post release behaviors of former offenders tend to center more on the reasons for their rearrests and reconvictions for the same or other crimes. As much as it is important to research on these trends, it is equally, if not more important to look for the first-time former offenders who have managed to avoid their previous criminal behaviors in post release lives. However, there seems to be a lack of studies that investigated this marginal group of former offenders and the strategies they have used to lead a successful life as responsible civilians. Therefore, my study intended to contribute to narrowing this gap in research by investigating the successful strategies used by the African American male first time former offenders to prevent recidivism defying all odds.

Traditionally, most research concerning former offenders center on recidivism rates (the number of times former offenders are rearrested), and their return to prison within a span of five to eight years. According to the 2014 report of the National Institute of Justice, the national recidivism rate ranged between 56% and 82%. Considering the top percentage as a gauge to the effectiveness of reentry programs, it stands to reason that 12% of former offenders did not become recidivists. My study identifies the significance of concentrating on these successful behavior patterns and setting them as examples for the newly released former offenders who may be overwhelmed by the social, familial, and personal challenges as they decide to begin their lives as law-abiding civilians. Therefore, this literature review explores published studies on the challenges faced by

former offenders upon their release, the different programs available to assist them, and the successful approaches practiced by former offenders to overcome the challenges in desisting from crimes.

Chapter 2 is divided into several sections that scrutinize the diverse aspects of the lives and challenges of former offenders: the first section of the review provides a list of search engines and databases used to identify literature related to the topic. I also included the literature search terms that allowed me to investigate different links and terms that revealed volumes of information on the complexity of the topic. The second section addresses the conceptual framework of the study centering on desistance theory (DT). The third section examines the prevailing themes emerging from the research on former offenders' successful approaches used in criminal desistance and avoiding recidivism. These themes include self-actualization, realization of purpose, health, external obstacles, policies, and recovery capital.

The subsections of the chapter delve into the nature of policies former offenders have to follow in their daily lives, their mental, behavioral, and holistic health as well as the problems their families must endure. For instance, there are policies that clarify how former offenders will reenter their communities, and conditions that apply on access to education, housing, and employment. Despite the challenges discussed in this chapter, the ideas of desisting from crime remains as the theme throughout the literature review.

Literature Search Strategy

Many of the literature search terms came from ProQuest through Walden University under the Criminology and Law Enforcement sections. Google Scholar, as

well as public and private libraries of the local colleges provided many relevant materials. Some of the research terms included the following: ex-cons rebuild their lives, successful and unsuccessful parolees, reentry strategies, and offender reintegration. The search also covered themes such as reducing recidivism, successful reintegration, successful criminal desistance, and the process of offender reentry.

Another resource used is the National Reentry Resource Center (NRRC, 2017). The NRRC is a governmental agency and research center that supplies resources for post incarcerated individuals who are trying to reintegrate into the community. The following search terms also helped in the investigation: reentry, recidivism, post release communities, prisoner reentry, community corrections, and reentry prisoner planning. More materials that proved insightful information resulted from searches that included prisoner quality of life, restorative justice, and community relations for former offenders. I excluded many sections of literature that involved certain aspects of recidivism, such as the legal challenges in resentencing and life inside the prison. Much of the current literature centered on recidivism and its consequences within communities. The research only offered a limited amount of relevant information on former offenders' successful strategies to avoid recidivism and how they desisted from crime.

Theoretical Framework: Desistance Theory

As an all-encompassing theory that concentrates on the diverse aspects of former offenders desisting from crime, desistance theory provides a foundation to analyze these aspects in a broader perspective. Desistance theory is rooted in the works of several theorists from 1993-2008 including Sampson and Laub (1993, 2003, 2008), Maruna

(2001), and Giordano (2002). In reviewing these publications, Cid and Marti (2012) explained desistance theory as the overall desistance catalyst that made or kept a former offender from becoming a recidivist. Furthermore, it is identified that a former offender passes through several stages of maturity in the process of transforming from a life of crime into that of a responsible civilian. According to Serin and Lloyd (2009), the authenticity of someone who has remained crimefree is established by these consistent stages of desistance which include self-identity, a legitimate source of income, and their contribution to the community. This suggests that former offenders have a growth mindset (maturity) centered on learning a new way of reestablishing themselves within the community. This mindset includes actions of paying taxes, working customary jobs, and interacting with social forces that encourage them to make a positive impact and bring change to the neighborhood. The stages of desistance are briefly explained in this section.

The initial stage of transition for a former offender unquestionably involves a personal change of perspective about life. According to Serin and Lloyd (2009), it is necessary to reach a cognitive transition for a former offender to consider themselves as a dissident from past criminal behavior. According to Liem and Richardson (2014), this stage of self-identity infers that they have reached a level of maturation within themselves where their past criminal behavior no longer defines their future. Thus, the former offender begins to show to others as well as to themselves that they have a new self-confidence, they are in control, they accept the responsibility of their previous actions, and that they are determined not to return to crime. Even though it is not a

permanent gauge of success, at this stage the former offenders no longer think as a youth or with a criminal mindset. Instead, they begin to think as responsible adults which lead them to remain crimefree and work for a respectable status in their community.

The second stage is finding a legitimate source of employment that ensures the security and stability of an individual while earning them the status of a responsible community member. Paternoster et al. (2015) revealed that both a stable job and a significant other played important roles in helping former offenders turn toward a crimefree lifestyle. While the criminal history as a former offender stands as a barrier to applying and getting a job, some states have taken appreciative measures to provide them with opportunities. Binnall (2018) reported that Maine allows former offenders to serve as jurors. As a result, the former offenders have an opportunity to become more socially conscious, facilitating a better self-concept and self-worth. Such actions simultaneously contribute to negate the stigma of a convicted felon. Therefore, by having a stable occupation, former offenders begin to realize their potential to be self-supportive, stable, and responsible. They can gradually lay a strong foundation for their future, where they are able to legitimately apply for home loans, manage a good credit history, and commit to a family or a relationship. These changes in their personal and familial lives gradually lead them to the third stage of criminal desistance.

In the third stage of desistance a former offender begins to contribute to their community. As Binnall (2018) explained, former offenders as jurors gained a sense of empowerment and they were no longer seen as a burden but valued community members. The former offenders were able to become a vital part of the judicial system and they

were given an opportunity to implement some laws and arrive at a democratic decision on crimes against the overall community. In such instances the former offender becomes a part of the citizenry which commonly excludes former offenders from law enforcement decisions. Similarly, the social bonding (locally) that emerges through employment, relationships, and education opportunities, provides the former offender an opportunity to develop a perspective of giving back to the community as opposed to taking from the community in his previous criminal lifestyle (Abeling-Judge, 2017). This remains an added incentive for former offenders to seek to reestablish themselves as productive citizens and to follow the guidelines of dissenting from crime.

Table 1 below is a summary of Paternoster et al. (2015) and several other theorists who examined the influence of desistance theory in changing former offenders. Each has offered their own views on the theory, and their own view on the turning points (first row) in the lives of former offenders which were circumstantial incentives to desist from crime. They hold different opinions on the main factors that allow former offenders to continue criminal desistance (Paternoster et al., 2015), but the authors suggested that committing their time to reinventing themselves, embracing the typical daily life, gaining new friendships, and accepting their new status in life were all important for the former offenders. Most of the theorists agreed that having a fulltime employment and marriage were significant agents in desistance from crime. However, they were not specific mandates to the success of criminal desistance. Row one also features the theories that are vital to former offenders overcoming a criminal lifestyle.

The second row provides the central tenant to which the theorists subscribe and support their reasoning behind ceasing from crime. Row three highlights the role of self-determination in determining future criminal actions. The fourth row in Table 1 explains the role communities or individual environments dictate in the challenges of ceasing from crime. The fifth row explains whether the former offender decides to create a change in their lives and whether the timeliness of that change is a critical factor in criminal desistance. Finally, row six considers whether gainful employment, marriage, and economic stability are key components to ceasing from a life of crime.

Table 1

Summary of Desistance Theories of Crime

Theorist // Critical Factors in Desistance	Sampson and Laub	Giordano	Maruna	Paternoster and Bushway
Intellectual heritage	Social control theory	Symbolic interactionism	Phenomenology	Rational choice
Main factor	Conventional social bonds and routine activities	Emotionally healthy intimate relationships new role models	Biographical reconstruction	Identity change

Theorist // Critical Factors in Desistance	Sampson and Laub	Giordano	Maruna	Paternoster and Bushway
Role of human agency	Very little	Role for human agency at the mid-range of disadvantage	Not clear	Human agency a fundamental part of the theory
Social/structural or individualist	Social	Social	Individualist	Individualist
Identity change part of desistance?	Not required, but may come after social bonds improve	No causal role, but may come later	Identity consistency	Identity change initiates desistance
Respectability package (full-time job and marriage) required for desistance	Yes	Helpful, but not required	Helpful, but not required	Helpful, but not required

These theorists were not cohesive with regard to human agency's role in self-regulation, self-reflection, and the intent on having a major input in their future as a valuable part in the success of criminal desistance. According to Mazerolle and McGee (2017), human agency is characterized by a deliberate action of the former offender. In other words, the former offender takes charge of their life and creates a daily pensiveness of their actions, including having the foresight into their immediate and future circumstances. For example, when the former offender looks for employment they must consider adjusting their form of speech as well as the previous mode of dress to suit the present situations. Consequently, these self-adjustments increase their chances of securing employment, housing, and educational opportunities. However, the theorists suggested that there is no set formula in desistance theory on how the lives of the former offenders will turn out by following the desistance theory. I can surmise that the theory will proceed on a case-by-case basis. All these cases are equally influenced by law enforcement, social services, family stakeholders, as well as the former offenders' pre and post view of themselves and their challenges.

The theorists also split their views on criminal desistance success relying more on the social environment where people and social networking help advance the former offender's future. According to Paternoster et al. (2015), Sampson, Lamb, and Giordano supported this idea, while Maruna, Paternoster et al., and Bushway advocated that the former offender as an individual alone has to make that decision to continually desist from crime. The theorists suggested that there is no single factor that makes a former offender desist from crime. It is an ongoing aggregate of factors. The former offender is

required to continuously evaluate those revolving internal and external challenges to decide to desist from crime or not. For example, a former offender may need to pay rent and they may have had all the available resources exhausted because of their criminal past and the recent community reentry. The question they must consider is whether to engage in a criminal act to pay the rent or face an eviction notice. Thus, the decision to desist from or commit the crime incorporates all the seen and unseen repercussions of either action.

An overall analysis of Table 1 emphasizes that none of the theorists suggested a sound reasoning behind former offenders desisting from crime. Nor could they agree on which resources provided an explanation to those former offenders who had all the practical resources to cease from crime but did not, as well as to those former offenders who did not have the ways and means to achieve a crimefree lifestyle. Nonetheless, it was crucial for the former offenders to discover an internal sense of self which is a critical component in aligning themselves to a purpose and a plan for their lives. Therefore, with the achievement of identifying themselves through a process of self-actualization, the former offender can involve in a prosocial engagement to help the community and have a successful reentry.

Literature Review: Principal Elements of the Post-incarceration Experience

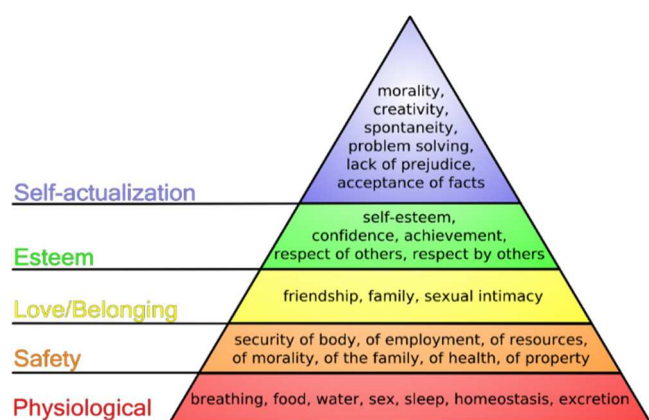
Self-actualization

The choices that made former offenders cease from criminal actions hinged on their self-actualization, where they reached a level of self-acceptance while recognizing who they were and where they were going. As Mcleod (2007) reported, self-actualization

is based on Maslow's hierarchical view that the individual will and can reach their potential (Maslow, 1943). According to his view, illustrated in the pyramid below, the individual's desire is not to remain still but to continue to grow in multiple areas of their lives.

Figure 2

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs



Self-actualization is the first stage of criminal desistance. Robinson-Edwards and Pinkney (2018) labeled self-actualization as a changed identity, where a former offender takes responsibility for their past criminal behavior and can recognize the necessity of a change in themselves despite the post release circumstances. The study also revealed how the former offender had to confront not only themselves, but also the skepticism of the community, the solitude of a personal journey, and the time constraints of transitioning from one mindset to another. The change of identity remained a lumbering process which involved highs and lows in the daily routine of departing from a criminal lifestyle to a contributing member of society. Nevertheless, the difficulties in the process of self-

actualization and successful reentry prove to result in a rewarding future for the former offender compared to the hardships and risks that result in disaster in a criminal life.

The perpetual challenges, threats, and hardships on a former offender's life certainly reflect on their mental health as vehemently as the actual act of incarceration. This threat alone impacts their daily lives, thoughts, actions, sleep patterns, and creates low expectations. According to a Cassol et al. (2018) phenomenological study on near-death experiences offered robust meaning from interviews of the participants. For example, the authors explained that participants described the near-death experiences as soundless darkness or remaining an observer while viewing themselves in an undesirable environment. In addition, some of the motifs gleamed from the findings included lack of pain, lucidity and meeting people, and the stillness of waiting. These vivid descriptions provide the sustenance for establishing the essence of the phenomenon. This example resonates with a former offender who is released from prison for the first time and realizing the child they were waiting to be united with is now incarcerated, or a former offender describing the raw emotions of being nearly violating parole and feeling the vulnerability of being sent back to prison for a longer time or sentence completion.

Leading a life of a criminal has its own life-threatening risks, uncertainties, and dangers. According to Sparkes and Day (2016), the process of self-actualization and criminal desistance has links to the uncertainty of life. The authors explained how engaging in criminality ages the offender. The constant mental and physical risk criminals place on themselves as they engage in and out of criminal environments takes its toll on their life span. For example, the criminal lifestyle and mindset are similar to

that of a professional athlete. There is only a limited time window of optimal performance. Eventually, health and time take its toll on the learned skills. Similarly, each generation of criminality is forced out or must move on because individual priorities change, including parental responsibilities, criminal sentencing, housing, or educational interests. As a result, former offenders have an internal battle against returning to a life of crime.

After suffering the consequences of their criminal lives and seeing their loved ones sharing the suffering, it can be said that the former offenders persuade themselves to reconsider the path they should follow as they are released to the community. Paternoster and Bushway (2009) reported that there are at least three salient stages of fear in former offenders reaching self-actualization and desistance. One stage is that of a now-self which involves the former offender living in the moment of criminality and all the circumstances and people that are engaged in that lifestyle. The second stage is that of a future-self which involves the former offender's sanguineness and dreams of a better life beyond criminology and in the third stage, the former offender fears identifying within themselves.

The authors continued suggesting that once the former offender reaches a revelation of regret and once the reality of criminal actions weighed against the benefits of a home, new friends, employment, and not returning to prison, the possibility of a better life overrides the decision to execute criminal behavior. Paternoster et al. (2015) reported that the former offender in their study considered the risks of returning to prison, losing family, getting an education, and becoming a contributing community member as

opposed to substance abuse and a future as career felon. This significantly aided him in prioritizing his life.

As the former offenders begin to analyze the risks and rewards of the paths that lie before them, they gradually reach a level of maturity through self-actualization. This informed, new perspective towards life drives them to choose the path that enhances themselves, their loved ones and in turn, the community. Therefore, self-actualization and its relationship to desistance is considered a vital part in the journey of a former offender who strives for a life of criminal desistance. Self-actualization and desistance from crime are addressed more extensively during the interview portion of this study.

Realization of Purpose

Once the former offenders reach a level of self-actualization, they begin to search and identify themselves with a purpose of life. In order for them to realize their purpose, they require the support of many responsible parties in the community.

Faith-based communities

One source to help former offenders in the self-actualization and finding their purpose is the faith-based communities. The goal of these community-based groups is to assist former offenders in their return to community with the fundamental resources to succeed by first following the guidelines of Christianity, Islam, and Judaism. These foundations are mostly government-funded to aid in overcoming alcohol and drug abuse while desisting from crime.

Dedicating time to a religion and associating more with a religiously based group provide the former offenders with a new window to look at life. According to

Robinson-Edwards and Pinkney (2018), choosing a religion provided an opportunity for self-healing, prayer, meditation, and purposeful direction for the lives of the former offenders. The study further revealed that the former offenders gradually learned the program routine, which allowed them to become more comfortable with attending to various services of faith-based drug and alcohol treatment programs. Moreover, this type of order and routine allow the former offenders to adjust gradually to a lifestyle with more responsibility and stability. Robinson-Edwards (2018) suggested that the former offenders are presented with an opportunity to look at themselves and ponder on their past as well as their future through the faith-based communities. They also get the opportunity to associate with a group of people who has a different set of values, beliefs, and routines that are highly accepted and valued in the society.

Some former offenders may have never had the opportunity to associate a group of people other than their neighbors, friends, and even family members who had a history of recidivism. The faith-based communities, therefore, give them space and the choice to identify the types of friends/associates with whom they should align themselves (Robinson-Edwards, 2018). These communities remain a contingency plan to meet people who are far from a criminal mindset that offered consistent hope. Hence, the utilization of a faith-based community setting seems to act as a survival mechanism for former offenders in desisting from crime (Robinson-Edwards & Pinkney, 2018). The supporting and accepting nature of such a community creates a safe environment for the former offenders to enter a changed, improved life. The people around them no longer attempt to lure them to illegal activities. Especially those former offenders who never had

the benefit of associating a different community or a community-based group begin to look up to positive role models and heroes. Such an exposure surely has an impact on self-actualization and maturity while giving them the necessary guidance and support to face the difficulties of a post-incarceration life (Rocque, 2014).

Challenges in Reentry into Family and Community

An area of difficulty for former offenders upon release is to prepare the families and homes for their reentry. The transition process of a former offender involves not only changing his style of life but also the routines of spouses, children, caregivers, extended family, and community stakeholders (Rocha, 2014). Each former offender's social support system provides stability and consistency in their lives (Cid and Marti, 2012). Therefore, facilitating the former offenders and their social support systems to make necessary adjustments plays a crucial role in the process of a successful community reintegration.

Preparation for post-incarceration begins early in the lives of former offenders. It is recommended that it should start once a person is arrested because 95% of those arrested will eventually be released (NRRC, 2017). Most of the former offenders transition from the correctional facility to a transitional home is preparation for returning to their actual homes (Ferner, 2015). The limited transition adjustment helps family members and former offenders to adapt to the changes outside of prison. The probation officers previsit the homes where the newly released intend to reside. The houses of the former offenders are subjected to inspections for a parole violation at any time, and families are continually under surveillance and subjected to review (Nelson & Trone,

2016). This may disturb the routines of the family members and impose pressure on their freedom as well. Hence, assisting and guiding the families of former offenders through the process of post-incarceration and community reintegration could prevent many domestic issues.

When former offenders return from prison, there is an apprehension among family members, especially if the former offender has been in prison for some time. It can be a greater concern if the family members have not been able to visit the correctional facilities because of distance, financial and transportation concerns, the frequency of inmate movement as well as the overall emotional trauma of visiting and departing a jailed family member. With one parent incarcerated, the rest of the family must adjust the roles to accommodate the familial responsibilities of the missing member. These roles are readjusted when the former offender returns home, and this could especially be quite a challenging perspective for a child.

The most susceptible to the post-release challenges are the children of former offenders. Johnson and Easterling (2015) reported that children of former offenders saw the idea of a family through a different lens. For example, the authors wrote that children were more attached and attentive to the caregiver than the returning parent. Also, the children felt that they were the advisory board to the newly released parent, offering them advice and counsel on reentry resources. The findings of the study also explained how the children of the previously incarcerated individuals were always concerned about whether the newly released parent would become a recidivist and alter the family dynamic again. Finally, the children's expectations and hopes often wavered regarding choosing a parent

to bond with or choosing to bond more with friends who offered the solace of stability, because of the possibility of recidivism and instability in the family. The child's mindset appears to adopt more of a reversed role, as the child becomes the adult, and the parent becomes the child in terms of helping the former offender readjust to the community. For example, if a former offender has been incarcerated for several years or more, they must get accustomed to the use of technology and other such ways that changed during their time in prison. In turn, this lack of trust towards the former offender and the change of roles may affect the future decision-making process of the children and the family members.

The most effective way for a former offender to prove that they are ready to begin a changed life and gain the trust of the loved ones is through successful community reintegration. Schnappauf and DiDonato (2017) reported that a former offender's failure to reintegrate into society might negatively affect the future decision-making processes of their siblings and children. Providing evidence to this claim, the Texas Department of Criminal Justice, TDCJ, (2019) demonstrated that children of all ages who come from a family with an incarcerated parent with an unsuccessful transition, can exhibit self-defeating behaviors such as alcoholism, violence, and depression. In addition, these children are at least eight times more likely to become involved in a crime-related event. TDCJ (2019) also suggested that they can suffer from the stigmatization of a parent with a criminal record. Besides, they endure separation anxiety, along with poverty, substance abuse, and community unemployment.

The repercussions of a father removed from the home and returned to incarceration without viable programs in place to help the children heal and adjust to his absence is a precedent for the continued cycle of incarceration and recidivism. Unless there are case-specific plans in place that offer child support payments to compensate for the loss of income for a family, the cycle of poverty and the behavioral problems amongst these children may persist. Implementing curriculum based parental classes (while incarcerated) to aide these men become responsible fathers through employment, education, and substance abuse programs can lead to better relations with their children after release and foster a future for the children to desist from crime.

Equally important are the parental responsibilities that affect the mother-child relationships for incarcerated women who may have to depend on multiple people to rear their children while they are incarcerated. Bachman et al. (2016) reported how motherhood was thought of as a motivation to desist from crime. But it was revealed that the complexities of substance abuse caused many mothers to relapse into a criminal lifestyle. This was because they had to cope with several challenges such as overcoming addiction, fighting for child custody, finding employment, and locating housing suitable for the children's wellbeing, that became a criminal desistance nightmare. The stress of attempting to survive as a human being is demanding in itself, and it is much more so as a culpable parent with a criminal record coupled with a drug or alcohol abuse problem. This can become too overwhelming and may cause parents to abandon their children and themselves for the lures of criminality. These challenges can be similarly prevalent in the case of a father who has been released from prison. Bachman et al. (2016) provided an

insight into the issue of parenting as a strategy to help desisting from crime. In other words, a former offender as a parent does not necessarily mean that they will automatically defer their criminal lifestyle for their children. Even though there are multiple variables that cause the parent to steer back into a life of crime (lack of housing, unemployment, debt), the idea of a structured working/learning environment with the multiple resources available to aid in the transition back into crimefree behavior offers consistency and hope.

Thus, a routine or a conventional way of living and accountability can transform the lives of former offenders and their families to a better future. According to Zeigler et al. (2017), positive daily actions in desisting crime emerges when former offenders are responsible for parenting actions that hold them accountable for children under their care. The authors continued to suggest that the routine of picking up a child from school or preparing dinner for the child had a positive impact on criminal desistance. Hence, it can be concluded that researchers, correction officials, legislators, and stakeholders should seek to spend additional resources on the children and communities of former offenders while encouraging them to be accountable for all the lives that depend on their successful transition. In other words, the issue of accountability is paramount for former offenders especially when children are involved. An effective strategy is needed to address the challenges of drug and alcohol abuse and the lures of criminality for parents to be responsible for the children and their lives. Further research is needed on how and what strategies will work to increase the opportunities for former offenders to maintain their criminal desistance.

Finding employment

The work history of former offenders is central to finding future employment. Cerda et al. (2015) determined that because of incarceration time, most former offenders have poor employment skills and questionable academic skills to obtain and sustain long-term employment. Inevitably, the noticeable gap in work history renders most applicants as risky investments in the hiring process. Cerda et al. (2015) reported that employability should exclusively be based on ex-offender's current skills, experience, and work history, which would significantly increase their chances of successful reentry. Therefore, a designated plan needs to be implemented to build credible work skills for former offenders during incarceration so that they would not become more of a burden on the funding from social services programs once they are released. Creating a fund to help reestablish the lives of former offenders who have paid their debt to society provides a form of hope to these individuals (Schlager, 2013). Similarly, allowing former offenders to continue their education and involve in vocational training while incarcerated would enable them to return to the society with skills that could secure a stable future. Thus, when the resources are available, a worthy incentive is created for the former offenders to stay motivated to live a crimefree life.

Further research showed that certain requirements in the job applications may restrict the former offenders from applying or getting jobs even when they actively look for employment. Most current job applications require former offenders to identify any felony convictions and explain any missing or idle time in their work histories or on their resumes. Vuolo et al. (2017) reported that employers used a checked box to screen

potential employees with a criminal past during the hiring process. The hiring maneuver provided employers the option of not having to evaluate the potential skills and experience of the employee or conduct an interview. This practice automatically decreases the applicant's chances of an interview, let alone an employment opportunity.

Former offenders have become direct and indirect victims of employment discrimination because of illegal and unfair filtering practices in the interview processes. Weissert (2015) identified that excluding and discriminating employment opportunities from someone with a criminal background is a blatant employment inequality. According to Westrope (2018), this type of employment discrimination shatters the traditional form of diversity, which only highlights the racial workforce. Limiting former offenders' job opportunities because of documented criminal histories is a violation of the Civil Rights Acts of 1964 (Civil Rights Acts of 1964). Therefore, Westrope (2018), proposed that the government should pass legislation requiring employers to have a clean seven-year period of accountability for all employees. These findings reveal a bitter truth about the society that is extremely hesitant to give a second chance to a person who is attempting to reform their life. A diverse workforce includes people who have paid their debt to society through prison time. All prior offenses should not serve as tools to eliminate prospective employees from employment.

Therefore, in response to the job application stipulations, criminal justice reform advocates created a movement called Ban-the-Box. With legal support, the national campaign tried to end the requirement for former offenders to check the box indicating a person was convicted of a felony on job applications. Each state has some form of

Ban-the-Box policy that is more content-specific rather than a unified national mandate (Weissert, 2015). As per the NRRC 2017 report, 21-27 states and 150 cities have adopted this mandate as an effort to avoid former offenders' exclusion from the workforce and employment discrimination. Ban-the-Box campaign assured that the job seeker is provided with a fair chance to at least interview for a position and if there are some discrepancies in time because of incarceration, the former offender has the opportunity to explain the truthful events. The employer can then make the choice to hire them based on the interview skills, experiences, and work ethic. The Ban-the-Box campaign raised awareness in the society about the right of former offenders to reenter the society as productive citizens despite their past felony records.

The abovementioned policies and efforts to provide the former offenders with a suitable employment opportunity are crucial in terms of criminal desistance and employment. Weaver (2016) reported that former offenders could successfully integrate into the community once they are consistently employed. There is an attachment that comes with the routine of working with coworkers who place a value on a coworker's willingness to arrive on time and consistently do the job. Weaver (2016) further revealed that the desire to work, earn a decent wage, support a family, and the opportunity to grow with an employer play a significant role in criminal desistance. It can be overwhelming as the former offenders adhere to a form of conventional living that they had never seen themselves doing. But when productively employed, they gradually become witnesses of their growth and change as they earn a check for the hours worked. They are then able to

pay rent for a housing unit, afford health care for an emergency, and build a consistent work history with an employer.

Community and federal reentry programs can assist the former offenders in identifying and improving their employable skills. Hall et al. (2018) reported that innovative reentry programs searched and identified the strengths and employable skills of former offenders that can link with community stakeholders. Forming partnerships with employers through these evidence-based programs remains an ideal circumstance for the communities in need of skilled labor and is an added motivation for former offenders to desist from crime. In other words, with the viable employment skills gained before incarceration or during incarceration, former offenders and community stakeholders are given a chance to build trust and develop a bond (employee and employer relationship) through communication based on problem solving for the job market. With this employer relationship in place, the former offender has an additional incentive toward improving his financial and educational status within his community as a contributor instead of a usurper.

An effective intervention to heighten the opportunities for former offenders is formalized education. Brown and Bloom (2018) reported that educating former offenders with hard skill careers after prison increases their job opportunities. This, in turn, provides them with financial and motivational incentives to desist from their past criminal lifestyle. The moneysaving initiative of having former offenders enroll in college classes is more of a benefit to crime desistance and to the community than paying for beds in prison cells. Also, higher education communities offer the former offenders a

learning environment that motivates them and places them in education-oriented surroundings that are remote from their former criminal peers (Runel, 2015). Associating with students who have positive goals in life can gradually encourage former offenders to desire the same for their lives. Therefore, effective intervention in formal education plays a crucial part in a successful transition.

A successful reintegration also has much to do with former offenders being accountable for their actions and behaviors that impact crucial aspects of a daily life including their employment. They are obliged to continually verify paperwork with parole officers to prove that they are actively searching for work (Hlavk et al., 2015). This issue of accountability also includes correction officials having former offenders always document their whereabouts. For example, some unemployed former offenders on probation must receive an employment supervisor's signature as evidence that they applied for work. This verification also presents a routine to verify their behavior and actions that they may have never done before incarceration. However, while the surveillance of former offenders allows the law enforcement and correctional officials to continually monitor those who may have difficulty in adjusting to the freedom of a post-release life, it may also lead the newly released to feel they do not have any autonomy in rebuilding their lives. Chikadzi (2017) argued that additional accountability guidelines involve all stakeholders agreeing on creating alternatives to criminal sentencing. In other words, stakeholders can discover and create different types of penalties based on the crime; therefore, serious felons would not be mixed with those who have lesser charges, which indirectly adds to the criminal pipeline. Also, the sincere possibility of having a

former offender's criminal record expunged after seven years or less offers them hope, more opportunities for employment, and an incentive for completing rehabilitation programs. Once these well-funded impetuses are in place, the emotional toll of returning home becomes less of a burden (on families and stakeholders) and can aid in the mental health challenges that await former offender returning to their communities.

Mental Health

It is imperative that one's overall health, especially their mental health be at an optimum acuity when beginning a transition from one life to another. According to Link et al. (2019), former offenders who are not treated for mental disabilities, before discharge and after release subject themselves and the communities to recidivism, financial ruin, and internal family conflicts. The authors implied that although former offenders should be at their best from a mental and physical standpoint to significantly contribute to themselves and to the community, there is a limited amount of mental health resources available to help them adjust to the circumstances during incarceration. Because of this, when they are released, the former offenders may suffer from a degree of posttraumatic stress during the transition from freedom to incarceration and to freedom again with limited mental health counseling. Therefore, they may be completely vulnerable to the criminality maneuvers. Ward and Merlo (2016) reported that the mental health of the former offenders who did not receive any medications or consultations was quite dire upon release compared to those who had their mental health managed through medical assistance during their incarcerated time. Therefore, it is a critical issue that needs to be noted, researched, and addressed.

Former offender's mental health coverage was strained upon reentry with the freedom of lapsing or relapsing into substance abuse. There is also the risk of former offenders using illegal ways to obtain their mental health medication because of limited or no health insurance. Under such circumstances the temptation to commit crimes is severely heightened, especially if the former offender was using medication to manage their mental health problems while incarcerated. Once released, much of the regulated care or the funding may not be available for them. Overall, the former offender may not be completely obligated or monitored to pick up their mental health medications. Finally, if they do manage to obtain the medications, there is still a possibility that they would sell the medications to mitigate family or personal needs or addictions.

The former offender must have an internal incentive to cease from criminality and gain strength through multiple supports systems. Proper, evidence-based, successful programing can offer an immense help for the former offenders in criminal desistance. According to Guse and Hudson (2013), mental health, posttraumatic strength, and growth of the former offenders have a direct link to desistance from crime. Therefore, it is vital to implement diagnostic and treatment procedures as a part of their release program to ease their post-incarceration transition.

Once the treatment is provided, further monitoring can be implemented as a condition of release. This strategy not only holds the former offender accountable for his mental and emotional state, but also hold other stakeholders accountable who are outside of law enforcement, social workers, and probationary officials. McMahon and Jump (2017) argued that the chances for criminal desistance are more apparent when former

offenders have an immediate and sustaining incentive, followed by the change of previous friendships. In many ways, most of the former offenders with mental health challenges have had a limited amount of structure, forethought, reflection, or self-care. The lack of these basic stabilities in life allows mental health challenges to surface as a way to cope with the obstacles in becoming an adult, while also making a person vulnerable to the mental health vicissitudes of life.

There is some merit to the theory that individuals who enter prisons may have some mental health tendencies. Wallace et al. (2016) claimed that former offenders entering prisons have some degree of mental problems compared to the general population, which negatively adds to the challenges of surviving and living a life of criminal desistance. Link et al. (2019) reported that former offenders should receive the health care needs, especially with regard to mental health, while in prison. The internal pressures that become apparent while incarcerated impact former offenders beyond their life in prison. The mental and physical challenges of witnessing and experiencing the systemic enslavement of people (prison system) and all that it encompasses is unimaginable. For example, isolating an individual for twenty-three and one-half hours a day creates an untold amount of mental inequity on that individual which perhaps will never be redeemed. If the mental healthcare needs are continually addressed before and after leaving prison, the former offenders can reenter communities and interact with families with strategies that address current conflicting behaviors. When their mental health needs are being monitored by the proper authorities, the nascent factor of hope is provided to the community and their families.

Behavioral Health

Upon reentry from incarceration, former offenders are expected to have already reintegrated back into the community. However, this behavior shift is not immediate, although it is expected by multiple stakeholders. According to Rocque (2014), the changes in behavior correspond to the levels of maturity in the individual lives. In Figure 3 below, the author explains the behavioral categories of former offenders that are observed over time. None of the categories are independent of each other or has a proper order of development. The only linkage between the multiple levels of behavioral maturity is the time it takes for each to manifest. Rocque (2014) further reported that the critical component to the success of the behavioral maturity model is that the former offender is engaged in the opportunity to gain wisdom through psychological, biological, and sociological circumstances. In other words, former offenders should be in the process of evolving. They should be able to recultivate relationships with their children, caregivers, and with themselves. These individuals who have been incarcerated for different reasons at different times of their lives are expected to be cognizant of their environments and the company that they allow to enter their lives. Moreover, they are encouraged to intellectually grow from who they were toward who they are becoming.

The challenges also extend to determining what and how their individual goals will be established. Furthermore, former offenders must consider viewing themselves as responsible people who have the demands of parenthood including employment, health, exercise, nutrition, and proper sleep. Finally, they also have a community responsibility

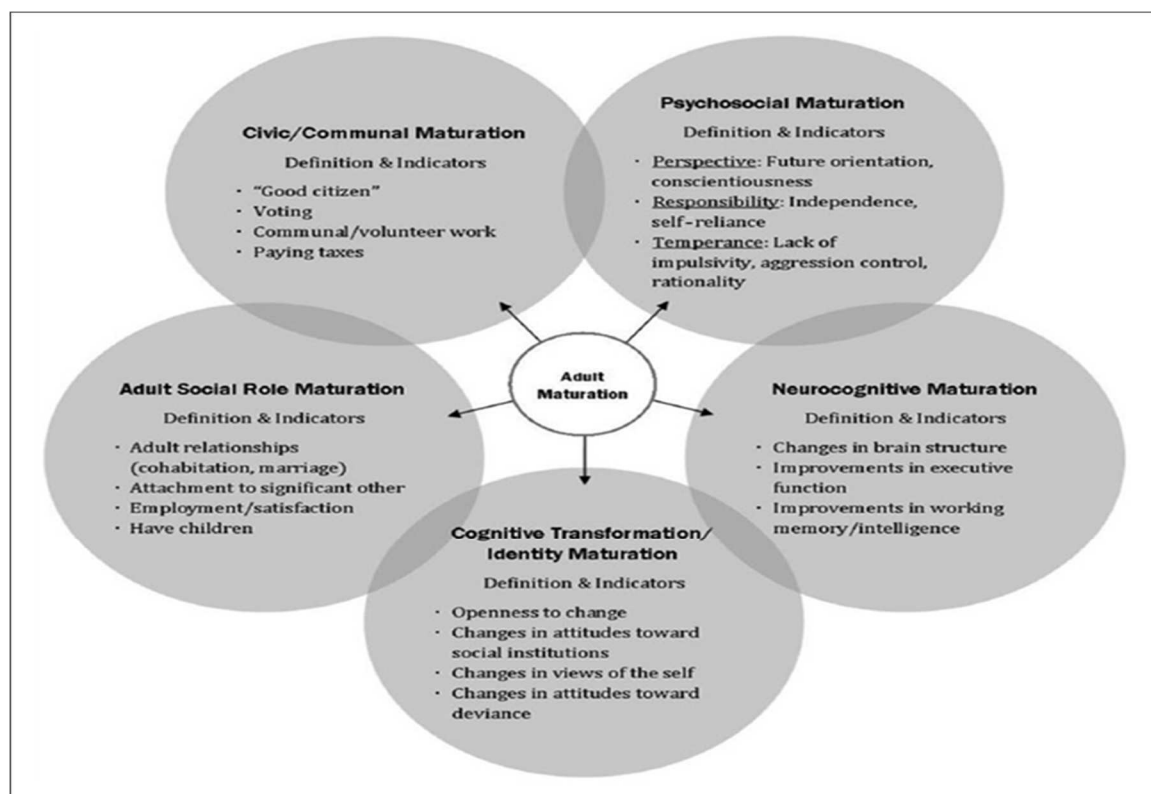
to contribute as productive citizens through making restitution, restoration to victims of crimes, voting, becoming politically astute, and assets to their community.

The strategies for overcoming a criminal past and maintaining criminal desistance is especially challenging for young males who have a desire to return to school in their post-incarceration. Glover (2016) reported that former offenders at a high school education level had to learn and engage in the process of criminal desistance. They needed the overall support from multiple positive influences, and they had to learn how to spend their time away from daily reentry challenges of maturing as young-adult students. Moreover, the young former offenders had to maintain a consistent mindset to overcome past and present obstacles with a succeeding attitude. This attitude was measured through attending classes, finding new companions, graduation, and maintaining criminal desistance.

However, in comparison to the young-adult former offender population who have chosen to avoid recidivism, the external and internal pressures for the adult older male former offender are much more formidable because they must reach age-related higher levels of maturity much faster. While they need to reinvent their own personalities and lifestyles among the post-incarceration challenges, they are also expected to be role models to their children and adapt to new support systems for the children, family, and the community. They may have to constantly face the most trying human emotions such as humility, vulnerability, and patience. Therefore, they need assistance and guidance to navigate such times without losing their self-confidence and hope.

Figure 3

Behavioral Categories of Former Offenders Over time



Self-efficacy

The term self-efficacy has multiple definitions, and this term can also be applied to the former offender's journey toward criminal desistance. The program initiatives for former offenders remain an instrumental part of promoting self-efficacy. Former offenders eventually gain portions of self-efficacy as time and the initiative progress. According to Rocha (2014), the features that sustain African American former offenders from returning to prison and encourage self-efficacy are the community-based organizations, spirituality, prayer, support groups, and jobs; these organizations must continuously collaborate with housing, transportation, and family services for program

efficiency. Therefore, it is valid to state that the former offenders who have been released into the community must have their basic needs met in order to achieve self-efficacy. Since these former offenders have their criminal past as a barrier to achieving these needs by themselves, their families and community organizations are the closest entities that can assist them in reaching self-efficacy. These basic human needs are undoubtedly vital for a successful reentry and a life of desistance in the future.

Identifying what these needs are, how to achieve them, and whom to contact in order to achieve them must be prioritized to lay a strong foundation for the self-efficacy of a former offender. The Successful Community Reentry Chart (Table 2) cited by Ann Jacobs (Director Prison Reentry Institute of John Jay College of Criminal Justice) demonstrates that former offenders are completely aware of their vital post-release resources to survive outside of prison, notably, income, permanence, consistency, and healthcare (Ferner, 2015). Oddly enough, the same basic needs of former offenders are almost identical to those of any human being in a global environment. The results suggest that despite their crimes against society, they have paid their dues and should not be denied access to all the basic needs of living and prospering in the United States. What stands out is the goal of self-sufficiency, which allows an individual to overcome a torrid past. Instead of choosing to derail his chances self-sufficiency allows them to make use of their opportunities for the betterment of them and their community. They are not relying on a society that made a decision based on the laws of the land; they are accepting their culpability and are determined to desist from crime.

Table 2

Successful Community Reentry Chart

PHASE	BASIC LIFE AREAS					
	Livelihood	Residence	Family	Health and sobriety	Criminal justice compliance	Social/civic connections
Survival	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gate money • Public assistance • Soup kitchens, pantries • Personal care kits 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shelter • Family or friend • Street 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Find children • Make contact 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continuity of medication • Relapse prevention 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Report to supervising authority (court, probation, parole, etc.) • Comply with requirements 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Receive peer support
Stabilization	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Public assistance/workfare • Employment or education training • Clothes for interviews 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transitional residence • Family or friend 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Supervised visitation • Get re-familiarized • Trial discharge 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Drug treatment and treatment of urgent health and mental issues • Counseling 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Earn reduced supervision 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Join support group or nurturing community • Volunteer work
Self sufficiency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Job that pays a living wage and provides benefits 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • One's own apartment with public subsidy, if necessary 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reunify • Participate in family counseling • Contribute to others 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Regular health visits paid by health insurance • Ongoing support, 12 step, therapy, community activities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Satisfy conditions of supervision 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Help others • Contribute to community life
GOAL	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adequate money for food, clothing, transportation, and personal and family expenses 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Safe, clean, affordable home that accommodates household comfortably 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reunification with children • Reconciliation with family members 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Physically and mentally healthy, or receiving affordable quality care, including prescriptions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Abide by laws • Live without community supervision 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Healthy friendships and network of supportive adults • Opportunities to give back, civic participation (voting, etc.)

Source: John Jay Prison Reentry Institute
 Matrix originally developed by Ann L. Jacobs when Executive
 Director of Women's Prison Association, New York, NY.

THE HUFFINGTON POST

In order for the former offenders to accept and implement the realistic concept of criminal desistance, successful evidence-based programs need to be in place. The nationally and locally exemplary former offenders who succeeded in not returning to prison for any violation are incentives for the newly released former offenders to overcome the challenges of recidivism with effective broad-range criminal desistance initiatives such as substance and behavioral abuse programs. Doherty et al. (2014) explained that program initiatives are required to have a clear-cut goal of reiterating and challenging former offenders to gain an eagerness to continue criminal desistance. The objective of innovative programming is to steer them toward self-efficacy through pre- and post-rehabilitation and substance abuse therapy.

Furthermore, the initiatives focus on individual needs with either substance abuse or criminality, and the goal is to encourage former offenders to develop successful strategies toward self-efficacy (Doherty et al., 2014). As self-efficacy programming evolves, it fosters a multifaceted outcome for the former offender. The results indicated a decrease in the high recidivism rate, which allowed the former offenders to feel less threatened with the decisions they made, without continually being subjected to violations. Because of the opportunities and support of the competent stakeholders for their efforts, former offenders would continually work on themselves, their families, their work, housing, or education and be determined to succeed.

Moreover, self-efficacy gradients and accomplishments gradually lessen the financial burdens of the social service offers. Therefore, the stretched funding can be sent to other viable resources within the community. Finally, the self-efficacy model promotes

a crimefree lifestyle for the individual which manifests itself as the former offenders develop their relationship with children and be accountable for parenting responsibilities. They would not become obsessive and concerned about catching up for the lost time. Instead, they are more concerned with becoming assets and contributors to the community. As their civil rights get restored, it will allow them to make proper decisions regarding the present and the future of their community.

External Obstacles

Legal Ramifications

Collateral consequences of having a criminal record outside of prison walls have their own disadvantages and enduring afflictions. There are 70 million people in the United States with criminal histories, and “the harms of mass incarceration do not end when an individual is released from prison” (Westrope, 2018, p.367). According to Tyler and Brockman (2017), areas of contention include disenfranchisement from governmental offices, ineligibility for educational scholarships and housing, denial of loans, and registering as a felon. These post-release challenges severely limit former offenders upon release (Schlager, 2013). There are also various state-to-state mandates that deny former offenders their voting rights, even though they maintained American citizenship before, during, and after prison release. This is one of the reasons why criminal desistance have become a major phenomenon for the former offenders. Despite the odds against them that still covertly hinder their return to the community, they find legal ways to survive. They refuse to become recidivists, to jeopardize their accumulating daily accomplishments, and to sacrifice their families for a selfish criminal action. They

desire to make atonement even in the areas that they have a limited amount of input because of their previous lives (i.e., housing, and legal issues). They foster humility and consistently work jobs based on their skills while building social and community credibility.

Housing and Family Issues

Other civil rights such as forfeiting parental rights play a significant role in the lives of former offenders discharged from prison. A spouse can use felony convictions as grounds for a legal divorce. Grossman et al. (2018) reported that the state law in Texas mandates that a divorce can be granted if two people endure a three-year separation, suffer abandonment, cruelty, and a felony conviction. It also provides legal grounds for the husband or the wife to file a divorce if their spouse is incarcerated. Many of the legal and housing challenges are not as overt as others and do not surface until the former offender is released. For instance, some housing policies as well as parole and probation policies indicate that former offenders should not associate with other former offenders. Therefore, if the former offender's immediate family is living in a state, local, or federal housing unit which prohibits former offenders from congregating, this could subject the family to forfeiting federal incomes and be forced to relocate. Also, because of the emotional tolls incarceration takes on the families, many of the caregivers, primarily the mothers, withhold many of the mental challenges from the parent in prison. Moreover, the mother may be reluctant to inform the possibility of a divorce to the father in prison because of the trials, separation, and responsibilities while he is incarcerated. Those significant issues usually surface after returning home.

Although it is important that the offenders know the changes and challenges that await them once they are released, especially those that could cause a strong emotional impact, research showed that they are largely unaware of them. Schlager (2013) found that many inmates are unaware of the laws of divorce while they are incarcerated. Many of the newly released, despite their self-confidence in not returning to prison, encounter identical residential instability, depleted financial resources, substance abuse, and criminal opportunities that create obstacles to criminal desistance (Bahr, 2015). These factors do not surface until the former offender returns to their community and experiences the repercussions of felony convictions. In such a situation, many of the temptations to return to a life of crime or lead a better life are influenced by former offenders' associates before, during, and after prison time.

Outside Prison Bonds

Although former offenders had to bond in prison due to close circumstances and the need to survive until they return home, it is not the best policy upon returning to the community. Kirk (2015) noted that there are state and federal correctional policies that prohibit former offenders from aligning with each other once discharged. The reasoning behind this concern is the crucial role home environments play in the successful strategies of reentry. Folk et al. (2016) reported that throughout the transitioning process, it remains difficult for the authorities of mental and substance abuse rehabilitation programs to separate former offenders from previous criminal alliances. The reasoning behind keeping former offenders apart from each other is possible gang affiliations, and alcohol and substance abuse challenges. It is quite difficult for former offenders to lead a

life of criminal desistance when the environment and acquaintances belong to their current and previous criminal elements. Furthermore, if the criminal elements remain the same, it deteriorates the opportunities for them to meet new people who are not involved in crimes either through employment, education, or mentors. Instead, such an environment could persuade them to return to a criminal life.

Rekindling the relationships with friends and associates who still lead a criminal life has its legal ramifications as well. According to the Georgia State Pardons and Parole (2019), fraternizing with others who are former offenders is a parole violation that could subject the former offender to rearrests. However, Heideman et al. (2016) determined that restrictions on outside prison friendships among former offenders need reevaluations by correctional authorities, especially if the former offender has successfully reintegrated back to the community. In some instances, the ideal candidate who can co-counsel the newly discharged from prison is a successful former offender who may have the strategies to positively influence the post-release novice. These individuals offer unique examples for current former offenders to gauge their present, past, and future success.

There are examples of successfully reintegrated former offenders mentoring their sons, family members, and friends who were released to the community after their prison time. Heideman et al. (2016) reported that female former offenders who successfully reintegrated into their communities mentored other recently released female former offenders. The mentorships in the study were similar to providing the newly released with a matriarchal influence that helped the women successfully transition from prison to communities. In cases such as this, the mentoring former offender's significant positive

change in life could be examined much more closely by law enforcement, parole, or probationary boards to determine the viability of positive influence on the new former offenders who now need guidance to reenter the community. These incidents emphasize the need for a case-by-case evaluation and decision rendering instead of imposing common restrictions on all cases.

Successful programs for former offenders come in many forms and some are not necessarily traditional. The above examples suggest that successful former offenders can help others to achieve specific goals with the help of a case-by-case curriculum-based program with adequate staffing and stakeholders. This diversity of stakeholders (including successful former offenders) is instrumental to the ongoing success of the initiative. More research is needed to determine the viability and sustaining power of mentoring former offenders by successfully reintegrated former offenders.

Policies Affecting Reentry I

Tangible forms of hope for inmates are provided through programs such as substance-abuse completion and job training completion that successfully decrease recidivism. However, lessening the legal burden on communities and increasing criminal desistance and ammunition toward self-efficacy are also among the post-release challenges (Runel, 2015). These numerous challenges act as catalysts that push newly released individuals toward becoming recidivists. Bahr (2015) noted that communities to which former offenders return are not economically, politically, and socially prepared for their reentry. These communities also have low expectations of former offenders and are reluctant to trust anyone convicted of a felony.

Other infractions include defaulting on financial restitution, unemployment, not searching for employment, not completing a general education diploma, and engaging in substance abuse (Bahr, 2015). Even among the dire circumstances that hinder the progress and future of these former offenders, there are communities that refuse to wait on governmental support. In other words, many individuals, faith-based organizations, and nonprofit groups such as Goodwill industries, Human Kindness Foundation, and Prisoner Reentry Network cater to former offenders who have housing, substance abuse, and mental health issues. Therefore, they can receive available support and funding based on timeliness.

However, former offenders must be cognizant that they have to do research to find the resources available outside of the traditional funding initiatives and not necessarily have state or governmental case managers exclusively locate supportive agencies for them. Moreover, this indirect approach toward community reentry also fosters a pathway of self-sufficiency for former offenders. Once aligned with the right people, agencies, and assets, the former offenders have multiple resources and opportunities to apply and utilize their skills for employment and criminal desistance.

Employment skills, and Transportation

Former offenders do have options for employment although the conventional knowledge seems to perpetuate otherwise. Areas that are in the business of hiring former offenders include construction, trucking, and food services. The former offenders must actively and consistently search for employment in all mediums at their disposal such as phone, social media, and word of mouth. However, Sugie and Lens (2017) explained that

much of the long term and stable employment opportunities are centered outside of the former offender's residential areas. In order to apply and receive a chance to work, the former offenders must frequent the areas that offer employment opportunities such as temp agencies and trucking offices to inform the relevant authorities that they are viable candidates. However, the lack of a reliable mode of transportation to get to work increases the risk of former offenders demonstrating tardiness and losing the job. On the other hand, if the former offenders use the family vehicle, or has the funding to go to various locations searching for employment, housing, and education, it may be of a concern for the primary caregiver (spouse or grandparent) and children.

Whether a former offender resides in a rural or urban area, reliable transportation provides some means of independence. But, as Nelson and Trone (2016) explained that an area of contention upon release for a former offender continues to be transportation and family transitions. The newly-released do not always have family members picking them up from a correctional facility. Visser et al. (2004) reported that a third of inmates released from the Baltimore Maryland Department of Corrections did not have anyone to call to pick them up or a place to call home. Some states provide a onetime ration of fifty dollars, and money in prison accounts is refunded upon prison discharge (Nelson & Trone, 2016). The timeslots are sporadic when ex-offenders are discharged from a correctional facility, and not always convenient for family members to drop their responsibilities to pick up a former inmate. Some former offenders may have to walk or utilize public transportation (if it is available) to get to their residences. Although support systems such as halfway houses may be in place for former offenders to help them

transition back into the community, there is more that is needed to foster independence and prevent former offenders from recidivism and isolation.

Credit Check

Another area of challenge that is crucial to the success of civilian life is to maintain a good credit score. Nevertheless, the Fair Credit Reporting Act (FCRA) of 1970 documents the arrest records (regardless of conviction) and adhere to privacy statutes (Westrope, 2018). The FCRA is a tool that employers use for checking credit scores and uncovering the criminal history of individuals. Westrope (2018) pointed out that FCRA is too limited, and the restrictions are destructive to former offenders. In other words, the federal government does not sanction the credit company to consider placing an expungement mandate on all felonies over seven years. The government merely provides oversight on how to disseminate the information and allows the blatant discrimination of former offenders without establishing a recovery mechanism, which contributes indirectly to increase the recidivism rate.

The issue of good credit standing centers on maintaining a good credit score for a considerable period of time. In order for former offenders to reestablish themselves after prison release, they must have access to credit or establish a line of credit. The availability of the basic services such as housing, employment or obtaining utility services for an apartment (including cable television) are scarce without a work history, or gaps in a work history (incarceration). It is a challenge to explain to a proprietor offering critical services, which is why the FCRA policies need additional investigations (Fair Credit Reporting Act, 15 USC). Therefore, their ability to enjoy the opportunities of

creditworthy resources and implement their criminal desistance plans remain a positive force for stable criminal desistance in former offenders.

Furthermore, the effects of this act also coerce taxpayers to continue to pay for reentry social services. As a solution, Westrope (2018) suggested an option to relieve the credit damage and potentially reduce recidivism by prohibiting the reporting agency from listing convicted felonies on permanent credit records. The justification for considering a former offender's credit worthiness is the possibility that their former criminal lifestyle may have accumulated debt to local creditors. According to Aaltonen et al. (2016), there is an association between tough economic times and criminals, especially those who are in socially disadvantageous areas. Although former offenders are eager to leave previous criminal lifestyles, poor credit scores, debt delinquency, and possible financial garnishment within a conventional society, this creates major obstacles to desistance. Oksanen et al. (2016) reported that poor financial decisions made during life transitions (adolescence to adulthood, lines of credit for housing, employment, and education) hamper their financial future. According to Roman and Link (2017), at least 60% of former offenders had legal financial obligations which included child support payments, court fees, governmental fines, and restitution. The authors also suggested that at least 60% of the former offenders had made no modifications based on their financial resources. Interpreting this data such that any delinquent debt that accumulates in any manner can place the former offender in violation of parole and be subjected to being placed back in the Prison Industrial Complex (PIC). At the same time, the squandering abuse of money is a prime reason for many former offenders to recidivate. The

accumulation of money is also a reason for the correctional system to welcome former offenders back to the Prison Industrial Complex.

Policy Affecting Reentry II

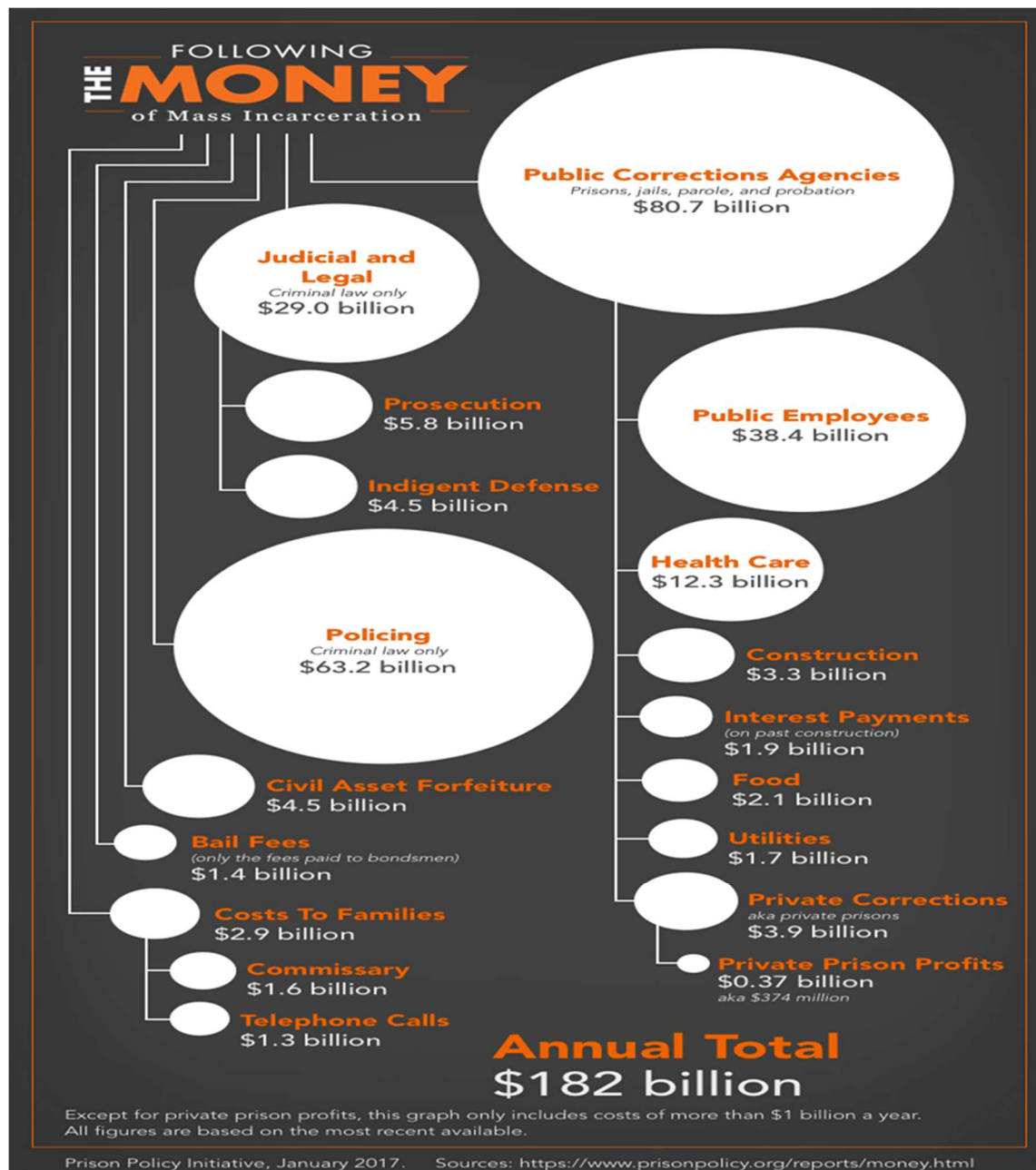
The realistic question dictates as to whether the Prison Industrial Complex was created for rehabilitation or profit. As per Figure 4 below, the income generated by PIC and American taxpayers for prisons, legal fees, and resources for Americans that are on probation, parole or incarcerated, have a significant annual expenditure.

According to Peterson (2016), PIC is a myriad of economic, social, and political entities that have combined forces to combat illegal drugs but also profit from mass incarceration of Americans. The author also suggested that within the PIC there is a covert counterplot with legislators, big business, and political influencers to fight against prison reform. According to Longley (2019), PIC represents a combination of private businesses and government interests that utilize the criminal justice system in their favor. The author continued by stating that PIC has the support of government officials to construct new prisons in economically depressed towns to aid in the survival of the residents, while paying inmates low wages that ill-prepares them for viable employable skills during community reentry. In other words, PIC efforts are steered toward advancing profits at the expense of prison reform. The covert PIC intention is to continue the cycle of prisoner entry and recidivism. It is profitable to communities, correctional officers, judges, and attorneys who have purchased stocks and receive dividends from the PIC within America Stock Exchange. Thus, the business model of the PIC and

governmental decisions on growth in business with its rationalization on privatizing prisons continue to prosper.

Figure 4

Following the Money of Mass Incarceration



According to Schultz, (2015) there are advantages and disadvantages to privatization, but the current privatization of prisons tends more towards generating disadvantages for the prisoners. Privatization creates a competitive market amongst other prisons to house, feed, and educate inmates. It is a method to decrease the overall cost of maintaining a prison. However, some of the disadvantages of privatization is that employees of the facilities may lose their jobs because of cost-cutting measures, while prisoners are viewed more as commodities than human beings. In this manner, it also behooves a private prison company to keep inmates incarcerated longer than usual to generate more income. Therefore, many investors within the judicial system who render the sentences have an addition financial incentive to delay probations, arrange early release, and implement longer sentences. Schultz (2015) explained how the privatization of the incarcerated is an approach to generate a cash flow for the legislators and private businesses. This is done on the backs of the incarcerated and is measured less in inmate rights and more in private prisons. Therefore, the facilitators are not held publicly accountable, the quality of confinement is not a public mandate, and recidivism is consistently expected to keep the correctional facilities fully occupied. As a consequence, teaching self-efficacy and independence to former offenders is not profitable and is excluded from the money spent and generated.

The money generated and spent by the Prison Industrial Complex is staggering and rivals the assets and liabilities of any global professional sports team. According to Wagner and Ruby (2017), the Prison Policy Initiative (PPI) has reported that the government and taxpayers spend \$182 billion annually on corrections and legal needs for

correctional clients. Their report also suggested that promoting prison reform or teaching a life of self-efficacy and independence to former offenders would stop the flow of money within the prison industrial complex, decrease the prison populations, and eliminate employment opportunities for those who work in corrections. Specifically, this suggests that the PIC should keep the cycle of recidivism the same way as it has always been. Teaching independence and self-efficiency would create people who can make a difference in families and not replenish the prison cells. Criminal desistance would slow the economic machine and force correctional staff and administrators to lose their careers. This idea tends to be functional as PIC has to maintain the status quo and identify ways and means through laws and policies to continue the legacy of profit over people.

Furthermore, some of the PIC covert guidelines indicate that the staff's economic and political influence remains stable even though the prison population may decrease. For example, while administrative and legal fees generate 29 billion dollars annually, 38.4 billion dollars are paid to public employees, and 80.7 billion dollars are paid to the correction employees (Wagner & Ruby, 2017). However, the data did not view self-efficacy as a critical component or a highlighted priority, as evidenced in a statistical graph from the Department of Corrections that itemizes the distributed income. Therefore, by ignoring self-efficacy of former offenders, or not offering any form of post-release sovereignty, the prison industrial complex appears to perpetuate their policies with only hints of prison reform but nothing tangible.

Recovery Capital

Recovery Capital involves the variables in the recovery process of former offenders, who are perhaps returning to the community, overcoming substance abuse, or being reintroduced to a formalized educational environment. Recovery capital also concerns itself with the influence of the agents of change including culture, family, and support systems. The concept of ‘Recovery Capital’ as explained by Chen (2017) refers to an aggregate of resources needed to sincerely aid in the desistance and overall recovery of former offenders. Connolly and Granfield (2017) reported that a former offender’s quality of life is one of the central ingredients of recovery capital. It is analogous to creating a holistic approach to the healing process of the human body and mind.

Once released and determined to lead a life of criminal desistance, there is an innate responsibility for the former offenders to seek ways to contribute to the community from the smallest effort, moving toward political, economic, and social achievements. Along these lines, former offenders enhance their community efforts by getting the proper tools to cease from criminal elements and eventually eliminating the need for substance abuse and selfishness. In order to assist former offenders through this process, there are in-depth, long-term recovery services called Recovery Capital Initiatives that are offered to individuals suffering from drug and alcohol addictions.

Apart from the practical needs of recovery, such as food, housing, employment, recovery capital also focuses on the former offender’s relationships with God. The national faith-based organizational policy objectives center on fostering social networks with people who are far from a former offender’s previous criminal relationships

(Connelly & Grandfield, 2017). Therefore, programs in faith-based organizations are designed to help former offenders desist from criminality. These faith-based programs also offer strategies to aid former offenders to successfully reintegrate into the community with the guidance and assistance of fellow community members.

There is an adage which suggests that when people help one another, they also help themselves. This offers hope to former offenders who have damaged themselves and the society as a whole because of their past criminal activities. Recovery capital generates the concept of earnestly helping people who have a history of substance abuse while addressing the challenges that speed or delay the recovery process, including drug and alcohol desistance (Ray et al., 2017). Measuring the effectiveness of different program approaches, Ray et al. (2017) indicated that programs combining reentry with substance abuse recovery were more effective than those focusing only on substance abuse. In other words, programs that offer a range of services to assist in recovery capital stand a better chance at assisting former offenders in community success. Therefore, these programs suggest that former offenders have additional needs that must be met simultaneously. The obstacles former offenders confront are specific to each individual, and no one has the innate tools to conquer those obstacles. Since the former offenders will be recovering more outside of the program than they will be inside the program, providing concrete tools for recovery can steer their recovery toward success.

Former offenders determined to change their past leave prison with the desire to have another chance to redeem themselves. They look forward to focusing on individual growth opportunities and spending more time with their families, which involve

corrections and serving their communities. Jacobson and Fair (2017) reported that former offenders need the opportunity to feel welcomed back into their neighborhoods by community stakeholders. Recovery programs have the capacity to contribute to this need of former offenders by facilitating positive social networking opportunities. Everyone in a recovery capital program brings various social networks to a session. Former offenders could create a social identity through these social networks that accumulate from different programs (Mawson et al., 2015). When programs aid in their recovery, it helps the former offenders gain a sense of their individual strengths and weakness; they become more aware of how to ask for help and how they can contribute to their communities while becoming more self-sufficient. Moreover, there is the issue of self-care, which means that they have to accept the fact that in order to be a better person self-care (not selfishness) must be prioritized, knowing that health centers around nutrition, work, laughter, and getting proper rest. Once these steps are implemented in their lives, it leads to better community and family relationships as well as to the belief that success is inevitable.

Recovery capital skills lead the members toward developing self-sufficiency, elevated expectations, and stability in their lives. There is also the expectation that influential parties (politically, economically, and socially) will invest in resources that facilitate positive social change for all communities (Best et al., 2017). Best et al. (2017) further suggested that the collaborative support of multiple positive social networks acts as a stabilizing entity for former offenders. Unfortunately, many of the former offenders were reared in homes that presented many inconsistencies in their lives as children either

through instability in housing, food, money, or a lack in parental support. In contrast, forming a reliable social network of positive influence is a critical component to the former offender's gradual identity change.

Moreover, this consistent camaraderie offers a hope to many former offenders who may have only had experienced criminality, poverty, or homelessness during their formative years. Community relationships through social networking where people can see, speak, and edify each other offer the former offender opportunities to disengage from criminal alliances and continue to desist from crimes. This stabilization supplies the academic, social, financial, and employment skills to help them towards productive citizenship enriched with hope and individual empowerment.

Equally important is the idea of utilizing cost-effective prison time before final discharge. Duwe (2018) suggested the possibility of replacing unproductive time during incarceration with optimum programming toward preparing future former offenders with job skills and education. This innovative programming would result in limiting offenders' sentences (not excessive), especially for those who are on probation or parole violation for minor infractions. Sentence reduction suggestions range between three to nine months for lesser offenses. Inmates would receive longer sentences for more severe offenses such as taking a life or using weapons in a crime. In each circumstance, the basis of penalties would be crime-specific and not a general view on sentencing. Duwe (2018) further explained how the money saved on housing, food, health care, clothing, and security is a reinvestment in proper programming. It is an investment in decreasing prison

overcrowding, reducing recidivism, and increasing the chances for successful reintegration.

Innovative programing involves reviewing cases individually and not using the same policies for all cases across the spectrum for criminal justice reform. Thus, the policy makers implement innovative programming to inform the former offenders, community stake holders, and immediate family members that the former offenders reentering the community after incarceration will not be treated as slaves, but as citizens that belong to a particular community. In addition to innovative programs, initiatives that provide platforms for the arts while incarcerated and extend these platforms to former offenders upon release sincerely assist them to be a part of the community by sharing their creations either through, music, theater, poetry, dance, or writing.

Former offenders need periods of expectancy. Cursley and Maruna (2015) examined the relationship between how the arts play a role in former offenders' lives to become better people upon post-release. The authors reported that after prison discharge, former offenders need redemption in their lives as an individual requires hopefulness despite the unfortunate circumstances. For example, some former offenders use musical instruments under the guidance of a mentor to help distance themselves from crime. The researchers explained that learning an instrument and publicly performing the learned skill create a window of social skills that functions as a form of expression for the former offender. This new ability is a source of encouragement and establishes an outlet for them. When they succeed through community help and have mentors with artistic backgrounds or social skills, former offenders begin engaging in the process of

recovering their lives. The available creative and social resources contribute to the discovery of their purpose in life. They can become better parents, artistically contribute to communities, and build their self-identity, which benefit all of society.

To conclude, the available current research covers a wide area of factors that negatively contribute to the criminal desistance process. It ranges from the mental and physical health of the former offenders to their ability to find employment, understand the impact of their return on families, and be aware of the policies that affect their reentry, all of which require constant monitoring by the appropriate authorities. Former offenders must continuously be aware of the events that can sever their ties within the criminal desistance process because resisting the obstacles and continuing to evaluate their self-actualization are worth the fight for criminal desistance.

Former offenders who have not recidivated since their release have to continually remain cognizant of the dual factors that can lure them back into the criminal lifestyle, as well as of the positive impacts of criminal desistance. According to Wyse et al. (2014) former offenders have to monitor their internal and external course of life and have a sincere willingness to examine the risk of criminality versus sacrificing their family needs. For example, the former offender's family may be on the verge of homelessness because of the inability to pay rent on time or the family has an eviction notice because the housing area prohibits former offenders from living in the area. What can they do about it? The challenge to answer that question is supplemented by asking themselves what is permissible to sacrifice. Is criminal desistance realistic despite the circumstances? How long can they abide by the rules of criminal desistance and live without being able

to fulfill the family's basic needs? Will they be supported by family members? How will his children view him as a father, or his wife or partner view him as the provider?

Therefore, former offenders have to be engaged in a growth mindset that is aligned with criminal desistance in the beginning, during and after incarceration. According to Dweck (2006), in order to change we cannot remain as we are or were, but we have to grow like a seed planted in the any environment. Likewise, the growth mindset would set the former offender on a steady path of learning and growing despite the multiple challenges. Most certainly, criminal desistance needs validation and encouragement, but former offenders have to gradually learn how to face and overcome the challenges to navigate the times when support is not always available. The growth mindset, along with maturation over the course of their life can offset the fixed mindset and lead the way to successful criminal desistance.

Summary

Aligning with the objective of the study, which is to assist former offenders in a successful reintegration into the community, avoiding recidivism, and desisting from crime, the literature review encompassed the challenges faced by former offenders, the support available for them, and the successful approaches former offenders utilize to avoid returning to prison. Also apparent were the multiple stakeholders involved in the post-incarceration desistance process. This means that the entire community, including all facets of the corrections and criminal justice system, have a part to play in increasing criminal desistance.

Chapter 2 discussed the themes offered by current and previous literature on the challenges faced by ex-offenders, and the factors that enable some of them to avoid recidivism. The literature explored the external obstacles former offenders face in the process of transitioning from former inmates to productive citizens with the hope of avoiding their return to prison. The chapter also provided some principal elements former offenders encounter during reentry. The elements included the mental, behavioral, and holistic health challenges as they arrive at a moment of self-actualization.

The theory of desistance and how the factors surrounding this theory influenced the former offender to cease from crime was explored throughout the chapter. Finally, the chapter highlighted recovery capital which features the resources that assist the former offender in a successful transitioning back to the community. In addition, chapter 2 explained how state, local, and federal governmental policies attempt to offset the recovery capital resources directly or indirectly, negatively affecting the former offenders' transition.

The next chapter discusses the research methods of this study, including securing the privacy of the participants and the process of the investigation. In addition, the chapter explains how I obtained samples, conducted the research design, utilized the instrumentation, and collected the data.

Chapter 3: Research Method

Introduction

This chapter provides an insight into the nature of the study through a discussion of the type of data collected, the instruments that were used to collect data, and the methodology that was used to store and analyze the data to answer the research questions. The chapter also discusses the research design and the role of the researcher. Several topics are focused on this chapter including recruitment, interview protocol, ethical challenges, and the data analysis plan. The data includes firsthand accounts of how former offenders have avoided returning to prison after serving a onetime prison term. The phenomenological qualitative approach is useful in explaining and revealing the participants' perceptions of a lived exposure (point of view) and perspectives (personal interpretation) of the phenomenon; that is, the practical models of the human experience of former offenders' daily lives to avoid recidivism. This experience seeks to explain how certain former offenders manage their lives after prison discharge and their internal and external battles to avoid recidivism, while living with the threat of becoming a recidivist.

Research Design and Rationale

This phenomenological study pinpoints the approaches former offenders utilize to avoid recidivism. It is designed to identify the reasons for successful reintegration back to society and the various methods they used in this process to avoid reincarceration. The following questions frame the qualitative research:

1. What is the lived experience of African American male (first-time) former offenders who succeed in resisting crime and avoiding recidivism?

2. How would an African American male (first-time) former offender describe his daily life desisting from crime?
3. What human agency determinants have changed with a crimefree lifestyle?

Among several qualitative traditions such as Narrative, Phenomenology, Ethnography, Grounded Theory, and Case Study, I decided to adopt the Phenomenological qualitative tradition to analyze the data of this study. Even though each of the above qualitative traditions brings unique strengths and weaknesses into the selection process, phenomenology suits the purpose of this study much more efficiently because as a means of collecting data, the researcher can conduct in-depth interviews that elicit a rich description of past experiences. The depth of the data required a relatively small sample size, and the saturation point was reached with six participants. This approach enabled me to explore the meaning behind the phenomenon of African American male first-time former offenders desisting from crime. The aggregated data included meanings, narratives, and summations of the participants' experiences. The oral histories of the participants, along with their body language, antics, authentic voices, and the tones of their stories, provided the sustenance for a qualitative study.

The other qualitative traditions were not suitable for this study because they could not capture the essence of the former offenders' stories. In the Narrative tradition, the limits of a single entity would not provide the opportunity to offer a generalized conclusion of the study. On the one hand, the time required for an in-depth study and the required skill of a seasoned researcher in the tradition of Case Studies led me to disregard it. On the other, utilization of an intricate coding system, analysis, and interpretation in

Grounded Theory required extensive training that a novice should not undertake alone, especially with regard to extensive interviews and theory development from the data collected. Ethnography was a close second to Phenomenology, but it was overruled by Phenomenology because Ethnography required a gathering of field data within a six to a twelve-month timeline. The expenses and the need to locate a funding source further discouraged the decision to adopt Ethnography. Therefore, Phenomenology offered the best option at the time.

Role of Researcher

My role as the principal researcher was an integral part of the study. I identified and clarified my position in the investigative process, where I acted as both an insider and an outsider depending on the stages of the study. As an insider, I conducted the study and performed all the responsibilities of a sole researcher to build rapport and trust. My race also afforded me better access as an insider. I shared details pertaining to my experiences in the subject matter: for example, I have family members who have spent time in prison, and two family members are currently on probation. I explained to the participants how relevant these personal experiences were to eliminate the potential bias of the study.

However, as a novice researcher who was in the process of familiarizing myself with the intricacies of the criminal justice system, I approached the data analysis as an outsider. This helped me distance myself from the collected data and avoid any possible biases that could impact the study. I was completely aware that I must rule out any assumptions and expectations to define what qualified me to conduct this particular experiment. I maintained a journal containing my thoughts, observations, and feedback

on events that occurred during the study so that I could reflect on my own thought processes, assumptions, and insights as well as those of the participants.

Methodology

This section covers the areas of participant recruitment, instrumentation, and procedures for recruitment, participation, and data collection, along with the data analysis plan.

Recruitment

The participants were recruited from the surrounding areas with a population of over 700,000 people, which included the principal cities in Georgia and South Carolina counties that have populations of less than 50,000 people. With the approval of Walden University's Institutional Review Board (IRB-09-18-20-0434505), I conducted interviews with six African American male participants in the ages of 25 and above. Hochberg and Konner (2019) reported that the definition of emerging adults and youth as defined by the United Nations are within the age ranges of 15-24 and is still a vulnerable population. As a result of the emerging adults still being in the social and biological life history transitional phase, I decided that it would be in the best interest of the study to recruit and interview African American males with a maturation age of 25 or older. The study reached its saturation point when no new information was obtained from the participants.

The inclusion criteria for this study were:

- African American males 25 years or older
- No longer on parole or probation

- Have not violated parole or been re-arrested since their penal discharge
- First-time former offenders who have been out of prison for at least one year

I used purposive sampling to select participants for the study. All participants were able to meet me in person for the interview and I also provided the option for participants to meet with me through Zoom meetings, Facetime video interface, or whichever was convenient for them. The participants who were unable to meet with me for a direct interview were automatically disqualified from participating in the study.

My primary mode of recruiting participants was to place recruitment posters that contained the title of the study, requirements for participation, and the contact details, including my Walden University email and the local phone number (Appendix A). These posters were placed in barbershops, warehouses, construction sites, restaurants, local churches, housing units, community centers, homeless shelters, and labor halls where men search for day labor jobs. I also placed the posters in email correspondence. Unemployment offices were identified as potential places for the posters to target the former offenders seeking employment and adult students returning to school. In addition, I used snowball sampling effect to accumulate potential participants by asking the already recruited participants to contact other former offenders they knew who met the criteria. I also contacted local pastors and asked them to introduce the study to their congregations.

Once the potential participants responded to the request, I had a private phone call (via my local phone number) or an email conversation (via their private email and my Walden email) with each of them to discern whether they met the initial criteria for the study (African American male, ages 25 and older, and have been out of prison for a year

or more without rearrests). I had no way of verifying whether the participant had been out of prison for a year or more without an arrest. The ages were verified using their personal identification cards and I only relied on the participant's date of birth as a measure of identification for the interview. Once I ensured they met the criteria, I informed them that they have the option to provide me with reliable contact information to keep them abreast of the study's progress and for any follow-up information that may be needed.

Once the participants confirmed their willingness to participate in the study, methods of communication such as email, phone calls, or text messaging for all participants were arranged. I contacted each of them to arrange a convenient time and a place or Zoom/WebEx for the interview. All the recruited participants resided in the Georgia and South Carolina areas. I traveled to the participants who did not have access to transportation and conducted the interviews face-to-face at a mutually agreed upon location.

Data Collection

After obtaining written permission from Walden University Institutional Review Board, I explained to the participants that I would like to use audio equipment to record the interview. I ensured that their privacy would not be jeopardized and asked each participant to carefully read and sign a consent form, permitting the use of audio equipment to record the interviews and to use the collected data for this study. I thanked them for their time and explained my responsibilities as the researcher. I emphasized that the data I collected was for research purposes only. I also explained that participation in this study was on voluntary basis, and no one was obligated or forced to remain in the

study if they desired to leave. I informed them that a \$10.00 Walmart gift card would be supplied after the study to defray the cost of their time while involved in the study.

The interviews took place on Zoom meetings, at the local library, and in local business meeting rooms (DWC, cooperation letter approved by IRB), where there were no interruptions during the study for one and half hours. I informed each participant when the recording began. I introduced myself and built the initial rapport with the participants. Then I read aloud as the participants read along with the hard copy of the consent form. I paused in between reading to make certain that the participants were clear on the information or for them to ask any questions. I clarified the questions they had and if there were no questions I asked them to sign the consent form. After that, I asked the participants to fill out a general demographic questionnaire because I could use some of the background information in the data analysis.

After collecting the background questions, I began the interview. The questions were open-ended and semi structured (Appendix B). I had my study questions arranged in ascending order, with the most probing questions steered toward the peak of the conversation when participants were more willing to relax and focus on the exchange of critical data. During the interview, I posed the in-depth questions and built an alliance between the participants and myself. These face-to-face interviews lasted for approximately 60 to 90 minutes, depending on the answers provided by the participants. I also took the time to listen carefully and observe the participants during the interviews for detailed data. Once the saturation point was reached I ceased the data collection. By then,

I had gathered enough data to ensure that the research questions could be answered, and any additional data was a replication of the data I already had.

I verified that the interview process was authentic and reproducible through field notes, journals, and audio transcripts obtained from the semi-structured interviews. All gathered data, including the audio recordings, observation notes (during the interview, not prior to the interview), and journals, as well as the contact information are kept in a locked cabinet for five years with one key held by me.

Data Analysis

After gathering the data, I first transcribed the interviews, allocating four hours for each interview. This was a necessary step as it was easier to record events accurately when they were fresh in my mind. I then typed up all field notes from observations, interviews, and journals. These notes were then organized to align with the research questions. I reflected on the material and got an overall view of the information gathered. This approach allowed me to capture the tone of the material. During this time, I also documented my perspective on the gathered information.

The next step was to begin a detailed analysis with a coding process. This was a way for me to refine my organizational process of the data into various themes through the QSR Nvivo concept mapping software package. In this manner I categorized paragraphs, phrases, language, and gestures, while identifying each concept, word, and phrase, adding them to my codes from the participant interviews. Once the coding process was complete, I utilized the descriptions to render current detailed information about the participant's environment and people. After the description, I wrote about

sequential events of the thematic process or how the motifs developed, and any subthemes that surfaced. The detailed description of the analysis allowed me to discover the insights of the data: In other words, this encapsulated the significant discoveries after the investigation and the new questions generated by the results.

Trustworthiness

Credibility (internal validity)

I used member checking to establish validity. After each response, I repeated the response back to the participant and asked them if that was what they meant; if not, I made corrections for accuracy.

Transferability (external validity)

According to Zhang and Wildemuth (n.d.), in order to establish external validity, the researcher must use detail-oriented language to describe the events that take place during the investigation. In other words, the researcher has to convey the depths of circumstances, showing the actions, voices, and subtle meaning through words; this depiction is equal to a full description (complex narrative of behaviors). Accordingly, I established transferability by continually recording all relevant data through audio recordings, written notes, documents, and detailed data reports. These notes provided accurate perceptions of the participants.

Dependability

To verify dependability, I created an audit-trail roadmap for future researchers to follow, detailing which gradients took place to duplicate the entire process. In other

words, I demonstrate that the findings from the study are persistent, logical, and reproducible without error.

Confirmability

It was imperative that I documented field notes, journal notes, and audio recordings of each word spoken during the semi-structured interviews. I transcribed each separate interview data within 48 hours to ensure the information remained current in my mind. I ensured that neither my words, insights, nor researcher-bias infiltrated the outcomes of the study. It was essential that the research maintained a certain degree of impartiality throughout the study.

It was one of my main concerns to ensure that I abided by these elements during the data collection and the data analysis process. According to Korstjens and Moser (2017), a qualitative study should emphasize trustworthiness (fidelity), credibility (integrity) dependability (consistency), and transferability (description and replication), all of which are tools to evaluate the soundness of a competent study. Tracy (2010) explained that the rigor of a qualitative study is demonstrated by how well the overall study is guided and executed, highlighted by some key components which resonate ethical guidelines and has significance. Therefore, I took every measure at my disposal as the sole researcher for the study to be trustworthy, credible, dependable, and transferable.

Ethical Procedures

All participants received an informed consent form (Appendix C). The informed consent form provided information concerning their rights as human subjects, their voluntary participation in this study, and their right to depart from the study for any

reason. The collection of data did not identify the subjects through means such as social security numbers, dates of birth, phone numbers, or names. The results of the analysis contained nothing that would publicly identify the participants.

I assisted each participant in understanding the research guidelines for confidentiality and privacy policies. The guidelines indicate that as the principal researcher, I must keep the data in a safely locked file cabinet for five years with only one key, which I retain. After five years the data will be destroyed. Also, I did not collect any private information other than the contact details. Any and all the other information gathered from the participants was utilized in the study. I emphasized that the audio recordings were used as data only for analysis and interpretation of this study. As the principal researcher, I met with the participants and made sure they had a good grasp of what their role and the rights were as participants. After the data collection, I ensured the security of the collected data and took possible measures to maintain the internal and external validity of the data. I respected the ethical guidelines and conducted the study to ensure that the ethical requirements were met throughout the study.

Finally, the participants received all the copies of the study's results and explanations in plain language as well as the audio transcriptions. Each participant was offered a \$10 Walmart gift card to compensate for their time and effort. There was also an opportunity for them to ask any questions at the end of the interview.

The Institutional Review Board (IRB) granted me (the researcher) permission to conduct the study. The board examined the proposal and certified that the advantages of this study outweigh the disadvantages and that it did not cause any reputable harm to the

participants. The purpose of the IRB is to protect humans from exploitation and harm, and to follow ethical principles in rigorous research (Grady, 2015). Due to the nature of the study, which might involve participants recalling their previous lives as felons, I informed the participants that there was no counselor-client privilege involvement in this study. I asked the participants not to reveal any previous crimes they were involved in or disclose their awareness concerning any crimes that remain unsolved. Furthermore, if a participant began a conversation about an unsolved crime, I would have interrupted the conversation. As the principal investigator, I am under obligation by law to report any such behavior.

Summary

This chapter provided a detailed explanation of the steps that were followed to conduct this phenomenological research. The role of the researcher, requirements of the participants, participant recruitment process, interview process, and the data analysis plan were discussed in this section. The issue of trustworthiness and the ethical procedures were also addressed to show how the reliability of the study was ensured for the future researchers to replicate without complications. Ensuring the possibility of replication by verifying the internal and external validity was one of my key responsibilities as the principal investigator. I understood that following the correct procedures during the entire study, adhering to the ethical standards set by Walden University guidelines was paramount to a successful data collection, analysis, and results.

Chapter 4 of this proposal centers on the outcomes of the research interviews, the correlation findings within the conceptual framework, and the research questions.

Chapter 4: Data Analysis

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological study was to examine the lived experiences of avoiding recidivism (repeat offense) among African American male (first-time) former offenders. I interviewed a sample of these men to determine how they successfully navigate internal and external obstacles and resist criminality's daily influences.

My goal was to identify the success strategies used by these former offenders to desist from crime and avoid recidivism, including their internal motivations and the external factors that led to those decisions. My three overarching research questions were as follows:

1. What is the lived experience of African American male (first-time) former offenders who have succeeded in resisting crime and avoiding recidivism?
2. How would an African American male (first-time) former offender describe his daily life desisting from crime?
3. What human agency determinants have changed with a crimefree lifestyle?

Chapter 4 presents the results of semi-structured interviews with six African American males, each lasting from 40-90 minutes during the months of September-December 2020.

I was able to select the participants primarily through purposeful snowball sampling. Before the interviews, I collected the signed informed consent and demographic forms. I offered to leave a copy of the questions and the interview protocol

for the participants, but none chose to retain a copy. We both read the consent form (I read aloud; the participants followed along) before the participant signed. The in-depth interviews were audio-recorded. I will retain the data for five years in a locked cabinet with only one key, which I will keep.

I transcribed the raw data from the audio recordings to text using a text voice recognition software (Dragon). After reviewing the text transcript several times, while taking notes and relistening to the audio versions, the voices, accents, cadence, and pauses of the participant, I used Nvivo qualitative software to create several codes, and six overall themes were derived in the process. The themes are, Big Motivation, Challenges, Community Criminality, Support Groups, Inside-Out, and Holler and Heed. After each theme, some subthemes were also derived from the conversations.

The inclusion criteria were as follows: first-time former offenders, African American males over the age of 25, had been out of prison for over a year or more and were not on probation or parole. After conducting the interviews and transcribing the audio recordings on paper, I forwarded the participants a written copy of the transcripts via email (4 participants) or in-person (2 participants). The purpose of this was to authenticate the wording, tone, speech (member check) and confirm that the recorded interviews and the converted transcriptions were accurate. I also explained to the participants that I did not alter any of the language or punctuation for clarity in the transcripts that were delivered to them. It was all raw data. All the participants indicated by responding in the email or dialogue that no changes were needed, and the transcript was accurate. I established transferability by using a Sony digital voice recorder to record

all notes, and I was able to document my observations and thoughts about each interview process.

Setting

To conduct the interviews, I had reserved a private room for the participants and myself at a local business, as approved by the IRB committee. However, all the participants felt more comfortable in their own environments. Two of the participants were more comfortable in a secluded room in my own home, where we were uninterrupted. Two individuals had an exclusive room within their workplace. Two welcomed me into their living room, where we were briefly interrupted, but the intruder was rebuffed, and we continued with the interview process. Therefore, no personal or organizational conditions caused interference or influenced the data collection or study results.

Demographics

The study's design limited the participants to exclusively African American males aged 25 years or older. Men younger than 25 were excluded because, based on studies mentioned in the previous chapters, most males in this population reach a level of overall maturity at age 25 that younger men do not usually have. As suggested previously, younger men are more susceptible to becoming recidivists (repeat offenders) and were therefore excluded from the study. Demographic data included the participant's age, marital status, number of incarcerated years, number of years since their release, educational level, current employment and the length of employment, and number of children and their ages.

Data Collection

I was able to hand-deliver and place posters in locations designated by the initial proposal but to no avail. I discovered that people (non-former offenders) were intrigued by the posters and were reluctant to ask someone about their previous life choices. For example, one professional barber said he would take some posters because his clientele is primarily African American males; he questioned, "How does a person bring that conversation to the forefront?" After the interview, one of the participants mentioned that he knew someone who fit the criteria that he would call and ask whether he would participate in the study; my participant noted that "...the guy would never return his phone calls and that he may not want to talk about that life." In another instance, I passed out posters and began explaining the purpose of the study. I found that some people (non-former offenders) were insulted that I asked them if they knew any former offenders. The responses were similar (e.g., "I don't know anybody like that!"), along with a body language which indicated that they, their friends, and family did not associate with or know people of that stature.

Initially, I was set on having a least 10-12 participants for the study. Amidst the above responses from the public and the national Covid-19 restrictions, I was able to obtain data from six participants with over 46 years and three months of prison time combined and, more importantly, a combined 89 years of dissenting from crime and not becoming a recidivist. Other than the above, there were no unusual circumstances encountered in the data collection.

I chose the phenomenological approach for data collection. As described by Patton (2002), this means that a shared social experience is the ideal method to collect data. In other words, the study is better served when the interviews were conducted face to face or mask to mask (due to Covid-19). I maintained recommended social distancing of six feet during the interviews, and I wore a mask throughout. When I began the interview, I had an audio recorder and its backup on a table in front of the participant; in between questions or if there were a pause between questions, I would hand signal the participant to stop his conversation so I could adjust the audio recorder to stop or start the session. Mostly, the sessions flowed through the 16 questions without interruptions.

The timed interviews ranged between 40 through 60 minutes. I used a Sony audio recorder along with an additional identical back up recorder. After completing all the interviews, I titled each with the date on which the actual interview took place. I transcribed each audio version to a text version within 48 hours, giving participants a code name consisting of their own two combined favorite colors, for example, Mr. Purple/Lavender. I then imported the transcribed text to Nvivo qualitative software. As noted above, six interviews were sufficient to bring the data to a saturation point.

Data Analysis

After reading and listening to the text and audio version of the raw data for several times, I began the analysis utilizing Nvivo. Based on the analysis I identified 32 codes, and from those codes, 19 codes, and eventually six themes, with 20 subthemes. The themes and subthemes are explained below using the participant's own quotes. I made notes of the participants' labeled names to help identify each one and took

individual notes to distinguish each participant: For example, each individual had their unique tone of voice and use of slang that allowed me to immediately identify his labeled name from the others. I was also able to pinpoint the emerging patterns and themes that became apparent during and after the interview process. I reviewed my notes and revised the themes based on the discovered codes for accuracy and commonality.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

I sent copies of the transcription of the entire interview via email to four participants and handed them over personally to two participants. I also explained to the individuals that it was the raw data, and I did not edit out or add any of the grammatical components to ensure credibility and clarity. Their responses to the questions were meticulous and were in their own words. Moreover, this maneuver was done to ensure zero misunderstandings between what was transcribed and what was actually said. There was no report of any mistakes or inaccuracies. I established transferability by continually recording all relevant data through audio recordings, written notes, and observations during the interviews. To verify dependability, I created an audit-trail roadmap for future researchers to follow, detailing all the gradients that took place to duplicate the entire process. In other words, I showed that the findings from the study were persistent, logical, and reproducible without error. The entire process was audited by my chair with the permission of the IRB committee, which allowed me to capture the vivid scenarios and experiences of this marginal population.

Results

The phenomenological study was conducted to examine and understand the lived experience of African American male former offenders who did not return to prison after serving a onetime prison term. Moreover, this study sought to explain how and what did these men do to avoid returning to prison. The following themes emerged from a start of 32 codes, which were reduced to 19, and eventually to six overarching themes. Finally, the themes emerged out of the former offenders' willingness to contribute back to the society they abused with personal human agency's thoughts and actions.

Theme 1: "Big Motivation"

One of the questions posed to the participants was to specifically pinpoint their most important reasoning to remain crimefree or to desist from crime. The participants were also queried as to what their goals were upon leaving prison and how the goals have evolved since their release. Some of the following subthemes were epitomized through the questions above (Theme 1) and they reveal how these former offenders were able to dissent from crime with the threat of being rearrested hovering over their daily movements. All these men had a driving motivation to remain a criminal dissenting individual, though the focus of their motives differed.

Finding a Niche

For Mr. Black/Gold, the focus of his motive was finding his niche, which suggests that he is discovering or on his way to discovering his purpose beyond prison:

The main goal was not getting back in any trouble, staying, and keeping walking the white line, just want to get a job, get a job, want to go back to school, and just

find my niche. You know, I always want to be an entrepreneur, so I always just want to go back and try to find something, get myself going to fulfill my dreams.

My Children

Mr. Blue/Gray found his motivation in his family (“my children”). In this instance, the participant concluded that his former incarcerated life had repercussions on his children, and now that he is released, he has the opportunity to change the present with a better post-incarceration life:

My biggest motivator will be in my children in my family because I learned that the biggest thing I learned about me being incarcerated was that I didn't just hurt myself. I hurt my family, I hurt my children and even possibly the victims, not 'possibly,' but I'm sure the victims were hurt.

No More Lost Time

Mr. Blue/Green indicated that his motive was to prevent losing more time in his life. His logic for remaining crimefree was an attempt to make up for the time he lost spending with his relatives and himself while he was away (incarcerated):

Learn how to reinvent yourself - because of the way statistics have you already calculated to go back... My biggest motivator is just a loss of time. You don't know. Life is not tailor-made.

To Be a Family Man

One of Mr. Black/Gold’s driving motives was to be a family man. In this instance, Mr. Black/Gold is able to discern the value of fatherhood and the value of accountability as a man to his community and family:

What I wanted (was) a house, a car, have a family, and things, and so these are the things that keep me going. That's what motivates me, my fuel, give me a reason to hustle and then go ahead and go hard and work; that's the purpose. Being a man that provides and do it for your family. So that's something I always wanted to do. I started looking at families, looking at certain things that I notice about how family, family structure. That looks pretty cool; I want that one day.

Patience and Endurance

Mr. Black/Gold further explained his daily mental grind, the importance of a routine in post-incarceration, and how that mental stress can be overcome when someone is working toward a goal. He emphasized the value of consistency:

It's rough sometimes. I'm very... I'm a perfectionist, and I try to do everything at a thousand percent. It's gonna come to you. O.G. partners (old gangster) tell me the world wasn't built in a day. Nothing is gonna happen overnight."

Strategies and Practices

Mr. Blue/White explained his routine in preparation for release and his motives to remain current. Even before he was released he had realized that for his plan to succeed, he needed to build and implement it on a daily basis, at the beginning of incarceration, during incarceration, and post-incarceration:

Well, my goal after leaving prison, even when I was in prison, I spent a lot of time in the law library studying law and stuff like that. I was always kind of like, you know, when most people watching TV shows, I was somewhere trying to listen to

some news radio station. It kind of kept me, you know, focus on what's going on in society.

Mr. Blue/Green also shared the relevant strategic practices he implements on a daily basis:

You have to downsize your brain, you have to downsize your way of thinking and look at what you were doing and how you were doing and how fast you were doing it and how loosely it was going and coming when you earn it, it doesn't come like that, so you have to have a different kind of respect for it, so that's the biggest difference. The biggest thing that I had to work with like just downsizing. That lifestyle was it was; it wasn't a fairytale. It was very real, but it wasn't lifelike, but this is when it gets tricky, it really is lifelike; for the way you're going with the way you approach the situation, you're putting different variables because guess what if it could work? It could work (criminality), but the probabilities are low, you get killed, you can get incarcerated, you can get injured. You might make it, but guess what, you might be in a wheelchair. You don't know how it's going to play out, but if you give yourself a right chance, you're getting most of those variables out of the way because sometimes you just can't stop what life has expected for you. You don't have to be doing bad for something bad to happen to you, but if you take all the BS out, the BS won't come to you.

Staying Alive

Mr. Blue/White added a chilling motive to dissent from crime, which was to stay alive. In this instance, the threat of staying alive while in prison or prior to prison is

collateral damage that permeates the life of someone involved in the criminal environment. Mr. Blue/white suggested that once a former offender is cognizant of those real frightening parameters, it can be a tool to remind the him that it is not worth the risk to return, thus desisting from crime is more conducive to living longer:

You know ... the dude that was on the same sentence with me killed himself, which meant my time could all go on him. Basically, cause he's dead. Can't nobody testify against you if they die? Anyway, the Lord just worked it out. I did five years, five and five, five in and five on probation. From then on, it humbled me.

Beliefs and Attitudes

Mr. Blue/White continued explaining his relationship to God as morals and his foundation that he could call upon, albeit his former offender status. The knowledge of God always provides a beacon of hope, despite getting sidetracked because of a crime. This awareness of a God of the universe always provides words of encouragement for him to grasp and witness firsthand that God is real:

I realize it wasn't all (about) me, (what I) learned in the streets.... (Although I did the crime, I still had a God-consciousness that set some standards for crimes I would not do) I was brought up with morals, and there were morals, that was my root, my grounding really. I always come back to that, and I thank God for that; right now, today, I think about that. If it wasn't for that, I don't know what was in store in me from birth, whooo! Where would I be? It's not hard to answer, man, cuz you know, you know when you continue on your journey, you know you ...

ain't got but two things that's death and (the) present ... you know if you continue on in the same condition that they want you to do that's all gonna happen to you. You either gonna get killed in the streets, or you gonna die in prison. You got to find a better way.

Mr. Blue/Gray contributed to the part God played in his motivation to desist from crime:

I got God in my life, and I pray to God, and he said he'd walk me through a lot of situations where it was very safe; it's almost like the passage where they say in the valley of the shadow of death I fear no evil and I've been in the valley of death with people all around me was like, people were dying or getting stabbed. So and I was able to walk through those areas without being tested off, and so I know you know what God by my side; you know my self-esteem is strong, and as a person getting out of prison, you definitely had to keep God as a center is a center-piece for your maneuvering through-out society.

Further explaining his observations of the community, Mr. Blue/White offered an eye-opening view, which showed how the maturation of the mind allows one to weigh the risks and sacrifices of a criminal life:

They see it, just like me and everybody else. They have choices to make. They believe thug life is better. Just like I did. I mean, they think the grass is greener on the other side. They don't look at the full picture. I mean, it's quick, fast, and all that. Everything done costs you something. It might not be right now, but it cost you something. That's something I didn't realize. It cost you. Some things I'm not

willing to pay again. So, I don't want them to go down the same road I went down.

Mr. Black/Red had similar observations about his experiences and encounters. His words shed light on the importance of surrounding oneself with good company and taking accountability for one's actions:

Old men and young African American males go back to that situation; they succumb back to that old man. The old ways and the things that everybody else doing because now you back in the environment, they rolling blunts, they smoking, they talking negativity ain't nobody talking hey man we got to go to work tomorrow let's get this straight stuff man to make sure we good or lets exercise man that make sure we take care of this and that you don't hear that. We need more like an accountability partner, but even with that, you got to be careful who you attach yourself to because some people will wear you down. Confronting they self, thinking for a change, motivation for change. I'm not going to blame anybody. I'm in control of the choices I make every day. I ain't going say my daddy should have been in my life if he was in my life I won't be where I'm, or my mama she would have done this. That's one of the biggest lies ever told; your mama is not the reason you act the way you act. You might have some genetic stuff going on with you, but until they realize that they have the power, they have the power of their choice, they are going to be stuck in a rut.

Theme 2: "Challenges"

Making Money

The participants offered multiple obstacles they have or continue to encounter in their daily lives as former offenders. Mr. Black/Red explained that his former employers would require him to work just enough for their benefit but would not train him to become independent of them. For example, the employer would show him how to install duct work but were reluctant to train him to install the electrical wiring for a house. Mr. Black/Red decided that he had to find a way to generate income. According to him, he cannot depend on the system to help him adjust back into the economy. He has come to the realization that a man can make money, but money cannot make a man. Self-reliance is critical to his success beyond incarceration:

When the background check comes back, the company said we are going to be giving you a call, and we'll contact you for more information. Still, you can feel the vibe done changed, and man I always you know any time we've done any kind of interview out there for a job, I mean I always knew the tools and stuff to even at that places like John Deer, I passed everything with flying colors. However, they still choose other people besides me, and I knew it was only based on my history, and you know my incarceration history as well.

Mr. Pink/White offered his rendition of earning a living and his crime on himself:

Drugs were my thing; it just finally went away. With prayer, it just finally went away. Cuz I was still doing it when I first got out and then some years afterward. Some years after I got out, I was still doing it, but I was still lying to people that I

ain't doing nothing, but I was still doing it cause I did at that time. I had a job making enough money and do drugs, and still, take care of my home. Some people knew, and my family didn't because I was out making enough money to supply, I guess, my habit and take care of my own and, I guess, the type of drug user I was. I kept myself up. I kept my appearance, and once I got through doing drugs, that was it. I know, that's it now. I'm going home.

Detention Apprehension

Mr. Blue/Gray spoke about the threat of being rearrested, and he explained that it is a difficult shadow to shake. In other words, it is analogous to being a slave who gained freedom but can easily be yanked back into slavery at the slightest mistake and the public who does not have a checkered path of incarceration remain clueless:

Those are some extra burdens you have a fear of always being locked up again just for any little thing. So you have to walk like a fine line, you know, and it seems like regardless of the fact that I served my time, I did everything I was supposed to do. I even went and got my associate degree, but even with that said. You still have to walk like a fine line because of one false move and everything that happened 12 or 20 some years ago. Society seems to bring that back as a nail against you, a nail in your coffin, and so it makes things a lot harder for the extra burden especially being a male African American that's been locked up before.

Mr. Blue/White's words opened a window for us to take a glimpse at the criminal justice system's treatment of former offenders that plays a part in recidivism:

They are riding him; if you did your 4 years and six months of probation, you got five years. The last 3-6 months, they write you off, say you gone. They ain't gonna mess with you. I mean, they don't worry about you, but in certain cases they do, they want you to do something, and it is like that for some people. It is actually like that the system is set up for them to return.

Caution and Frustration

Mr. Blue/White spoke more candidly about this daily threat. It is a fear factor (weighted boulder) being carried up a hill. It not only hinders the growth of a man in his daily life, but the respect he expects to gain from his family. In some instances, it limits where their families can live, work, or who they associate with:

Man, it affects me almost every day. I mean, it keeps me cautious. I know what can happen at the drop of a dime. I got a, in fact, right now, I got a cousin that's on the same case I was on; his probation ends in 2 or 3 months. We are not supposed to even socialize because we're two criminals. We don't fool around, but they can't stop us cause we cousins. But you know the effects, I see them take him through, they dragged him, right now he got 30 something days, he still has visits from the probation officer. They are riding him to the end. You know, I just tell him to hang in there, getting frustrated that's frustration, you know.

Mr. Blue/Green commented on the anxiousness of former offenders whose support was curtailed; "I've seen so many people that can get out, but nobody on the outside will let him in because they burn bridges with a family."

Seizing Accountability

The participants also spoke of some of the other challenges, such as battling the temptation to commit additional crimes because of their financial challenges. Mr. Blue/Green further stated how opportunities appear to commit crimes and how he sees both extreme sides of the risk. Therefore, if all they have is themselves, then they must seize the chance to be accountable for the first time and to do the right thing:

It's all about how you approach it. I mean to you have to pick your poison, like, do you want to do this once you've been in the fire? You already know how it feels to get burned, so if you do it again, that's on you. You already know, you been on both sides, so the choice is yours, the choice is yours is not like oh I didn't know, so that went once you get incarcerated one time that kills that I didn't know. So now you know this what it is, this what is not, so when you do it again for you, willingly volunteer to do it you should be willing to accept the consequences, so this is all about your mind if you want to do it or don't. You might get away with it a couple of times, but you know how it plays out.

Theme 3: Living with "Community Criminality"

Some of the interview questions focused on the participant's mindset when they witness a crime or live in criminal environments. Some of such questions were: "How safe do you feel around criminal environments?", "What does a former offender do when the opportunities to commit a crime within the community appear?", and "What sort of temptations that exist that may draw you back into a life of crime?"

Recognized, My Safe Haven

Mr. Blue/Gray shared his perceptions on Community Criminality. In this instance, he has adjusted to the environments of criminality because, ironically, it was the same environment that he abused as a criminal. Now as a former offender who has matured and is not an immediate threat, he is able to maneuver amongst these communities. These environments have become a place of solace for him because he sees both sides of the communities and has chosen to become an asset, no longer a liability:

I feel safe around criminal environments because most of the time, I have an understanding that you know crime most crimes are committed for a few reasons, and one of the reasons they don't have the education is lacking within the African American societies, so when I'm in a criminal environment with people may be selling drugs or for the stuff they need. Yeah, they in the ghetto and stuff like that. Did those people have it worse than me? No, I'm no better. I feel comfortable around them, understanding at the same time and that they are in poverty and so a crime could happen just for those reasons. Because when a person is in poverty, I mean there's no telling what they may do to try to get the next meal, keep their lights on or pay a bill or anything; you have to just understand that in certain environments, there is going to be a threat.

God, Faith, Safety

Mr. Blue/Green offered the same view, but with a stipulation. He stated that he feels comfortable among a diverse community of people from all walks of life because he gained the skills to negotiate businesses and his experiences inside and outside of

incarceration. However, as a parent, he is hesitant to fully engage his children in both sides of the environment for fear of them not having the survival skills to exist, much less have a God-consciousness to resist the temptations of criminality:

I'm blessed and anointed, so I feel safe wherever I go, but far as being around it, I'm more scared for my kids more than myself because I'm not scared of my own people, my own environment, I mean I don't just have to gravitate and just stay there, but I'm not afraid to go in my community you know cuz I mean I'm no better than them and then when you've been incarcerated, you around the same people that's out there and here you just in a closed environment so what's really the difference. You can't tell the difference whether you on the street; you can run from it, and when you are inside there, you are locked in, so you have to face it and deal with it.

Minding My Business

Mr. Blue/White offered a more vivid view of engaging in community criminality. He explained that the offers to participate in a criminal enterprise are always available and that it is best to back off. In other words, he may attentively listen but cautiously decline, and if he does accept, the risk is minimal:

It doesn't bother me. Honestly, I don't participate, so I hardly ever be in the midst of it. I might go around or go through it, but I don't stay. I mean to say that I don't see it. I mean, sometimes I even participate in it. But that's where I'm from. If I will cut myself off from everybody that I know and associate with, shxx, 90% of the folks I know are criminals. That's just a fact one way or another. We might not

be criminals now, but we were criminals then. So everybody I associate with has got a past, and most are bout like me'—it my past.

Mr. Pink/White also explained his thoughts on the overall community criminality challenge:

I don't get involved, but if I see something kind of going down before it gets actually there, I try to speak to people. I mean, you know, not speak to him, but say hey, we don't need this around here, you know, and try to encourage them. I mean, if it was finna go down, if it hasn't gone down, I'm trying to talk to them, man it ain't worth it. Finally, Mr. Black/Red explains his best route for dealing with criminal opportunities in any environment. I get out of those environments if they're a possibility of something happening, I don't stay there long, but I know something possible that can happen, then I get on out of there.

Mr. Black/Gold explained his logic in minding his own business:

I know what to expect out of those situations. If I know the person and he triggers happy, I know if he gets into a situation, he gonna pull a gun out, and I know what he's gonna do, I know when I see that problem about to escalate, I know to leave, and try to leave before it gets to that point. You know, I know I know cause I've been around a person that's aggressive, and like to fight, so you know I know this energy.

Mr. Black/Red also contributed his rendition of how to maintain cautiousness:

If that's the kind of energy you around then the chance are you will start doing these things and make things happen, but if you hang around negativity and one

of the biggest problems that a lot of African-Americans are faced with once they get out is that they have to go back into a situation that's not going to be pleasant for them. They don't have a choice because that's where they got to parole to, they gotta parole to a broken home that's been broken for so many years.

Theme 4: "Inside-Out"

This particular theme offered insights into the former offenders' continual mentioning of their lives as offenders. In other words, during the interviews, their thought patterns often referred to their life in prison, although they had been released from incarceration. None of the questions dealt directly with their incarcerated life, but the former offenders continue to refer back and forth between their incarcerated life and life outside of prison. This theme emerged out of the conversations about life after prison. In other words, it appeared that it was hard for them to rid themselves of the psychological damage of some of the individual pains and difficult experiences they underwent during their incarceration; those experiences, both positive and negative, have bled into their everyday conversations and could not be immobilized from their present.

Prison-dehumanization, parole/probation a notch under

Mr. Blue/Gray provided such unique insights on this theme. The spontaneity of life in prison generated more reflections by the participant without any impetus of a direct question pertaining to incarceration. This only suggests that although the participants are outside prison walls, sectors of their thinking remain incarcerated:

The transition from prison back out of this society is so hard when you are in prison. Their entire structure is set up to dehumanize you make me think you're

not even a citizen American citizen anymore. They treat you almost like you're an animal life in prison. I mean, these are some of the things that happen in prison. You wouldn't wish on your worst enemy because you would think in America that as an American citizen you would not be treated, even though you committed a crime but you wouldn't be treated as inhumane as they do in prison so when you get out of prison, and you start receiving freedoms ... (you're still treated meanly) ... like my parole officer, she always tells me when I first got out, oh, you going back; I tell her I'm not going, never going back to prison. Oh, you're just saying that now, something is going to happen to you.

Mr. Blue/Green explained his version of prison with regard to his employment. He suggested that nothing was learned other than the routine of falling in line, getting comfortable with skills inside so they can be paid a minimum wage once they are released. Thus, prison has not fostered an entrepreneurial mindset:

Because of the same job that I was doing while incarcerated, I'm doing that for free there, so now you want me to get out and do it for \$7 or \$8. I'm not going to do it. (There is more in me, I know my worth despite former offender status) I'm not saying it's not good for anyone else, not knocking it, but that wasn't my route.

Psychological Factors

These cognitive features remain evident to those who are incarcerated and those who are released back to the society. Mr. Blue/White can identify former offenders in the manner of how each person may carry themselves; it could be their gait, tattoos,

conversation, attitude, attire, or employment frustration. Mr. Blue/White presented his case:

People coming out of prison, some of them are institutionalized, they been in prison 20 years they know nothing about nothing going. When they take them and drop them back out here and not with education with no books and stuff, he needs to be a transition back into society; you know what I mean. You can't just throw him out. The system is designed to get you right back in. you know the technology they have now; they can get you back in a minute. They can hook you with this and that, and say you were with this. Plain and simple. Conspiracy, they call it, and you're gone again.

Mr. Blue/Gray offered a different perspective that was not usually considered:

When I transition back into society, so a lot of things I went through when I was in prison, I had to slowly ... understand that hey, I'm not here (there?) no more and regardless of how people look at me and you know it doesn't matter. Just try and keep pushing and try to do the right thing. So like when I first got out of prison, and I'll never forget, we went to a store, and my family came and picked me up, and we went to the store, and I asked him (for permission to get out of the car) can I get out and go into the store and they were like yeah, you're free. So to them, it was kind of funny, but they didn't understand my psychological dysfunctions from transitioning from prison to a free society again. So when I went into the store and stuff and I was like you know they gave, put money in my

hand, I'm like just another thing in prison you don't you'll never get the opportunity to hold real currency.

Mr. Blue/Green contributed to the theme with the following note on how modern technology and the routine life of incarceration changes rapidly as they face the challenges of life outside prison:

Now you know they have all the modern technology in there, and I think that's a curse because it almost gets you settled. You don't have it that you do not get mail that says a bill is due. You don't have to get up and go to, you have to go to work, but you are doing that for nothing; you have nothing to look forward to. All you have to do is look out for personal help for your safety and well-being. Then when pressures hit (when you released) you all at one time, or I'm on the leg monitor, if I got to pay this or that damn I ain't got no job shit gets real it's getting real now every 30 days a bill is coming, so that's a big shocker, when you go from nothing now I got to make all this stuff happen, but you have no obligations (incarceration), you wait on somebody to send you some money, so you getting lazy.

Roll with it, coincide with everyone.

Mr. Blue/Green talked about the adaptability that is essential for a former offender to adjust back into the community. In other words, a former offender cannot return to who they were. Part of the community does not expect former offenders to be who they were, and another part suspects that they have not changed. There will be some apprehension on the part of the community because they have sinned against the

community. But on the other hand, the community does not expect them to be choir boys. They have to find or create a way to contribute more than they took from the community and adapt to rebuild their reputation throughout the rest of their lifetime:

I don't want to know the regular Joe. I keep it real with my community and the people I'm gonna kick it with my robbers, my bankers, my politicians, my drug dealers, all of them. They are people. That's just what they choose, and as an African American, I'm never going to be the same as being incarcerated. It is going to make you, don't be scared of anything, not scared of people; it makes you learn how to intermingle with people that are not of your walks of life; you got to roll with it, or you are going to get rolled over. You have to apply to the streets, certain lifestyles I don't agree with but inside or out here, they're going to be around you, they're going to sheep and wolves around, they're gonna be around you, you can shun them or run from them. You have to know how to coincide with people. So I take that same application and apply it to the streets, out here in the community, or in life. You know, calling streets, it sounds derogatory in one way. I'm not in the streets, I'm in the community now, but I deal with the streets and all of it, you know I deal with all walks of life I cut (Barber) everybody, this business allows me to see everybody, and I'm not gonna treat anybody differently.

Mr. Blue/White offered his version of living inside and outside of incarceration:

The way a black man is treated in prison shouldn't be. Prison is nothing; it's something to bring you back. It's like a revolving door; you get nothing, if you want nothing out of it, they ain't going to give you nothing out of it, you know

you are going to be worse, then when you come out than when you went in. For a lot of people, it is a lot of choices you had to make, the choices you had to see. I saw something two days ago, man, you know, the little brother of mine I was talking to, no name, He was talking to a dude that was locked up. He locked uptight, but he got everything he wants. He on the phone making deals and whatever and stuff like that, that ain't, I don't think that's the way. It ain't what you do; it's how you do it. You know you got to submit yourself to something or somebody. You got to humble yourself, I don't know, it's round me, I don't deal with it, so I guess, my faith and my belief, you know I'm not a church-going person, but I believe in God, and I submit myself to that, if I wouldn't, I wouldn't be here today you know, a lot of different ways but you know.

Theme 5: "Support Groups"

The participants were able to share the types of support each had prior to and after leaving prison. Moreover, they explained how the support from likely and unlikely places significantly aided in desisting from crime. In this instance, questions centered on church, community support groups, and their beneficence in helping former offenders avoid recidivism.

Kindred Kindness

Mr. Blue/Green resonated with the personal and physiological threats to former offender's family life mentioned above, especially for fathers who had significant roles in their children's lives. Moreover, the reflections the children shared on how their father's

absence affected their lives were strong anchors that held former offenders in a crimefree life:

It knocks family structure off, finance, everything you work for. It would affect my whole life and also affects other people's lives. That's what a lot of people don't realize. With parents, your parents hurting, you are leaving children behind to have another authoritative figure in front of them, you know, and that affects them mentally. And I know that through experience with my oldest son's, not negative, not a negative effect but an effect. You know it alters you. You know, if it didn't, he wouldn't share or explain feelings with me, and it affects me.

Mr. Black/Red spoke candidly about the family support systems:

My family had a great part in my incarceration because a man without no hope and no faith is a dangerous man. Man ain't got no hope and no faith he's a lost man and gotta go though. I was incarcerated, that was my reality, but I always had the thoughts and the hopes of returning with my family, and they would write me letters and they would encourage me, and my mom and especially my mom would encourage me, my father would encourage me, and you know just that hope I know you are going to get out and you are going to do this. I know you could do this cuz you got the potential man.

Mr. Blue/Gray expressed that the support groups from family and community are both just as valuable:

You definitely need to have some type of family support, and if you don't have family support, it's good to have community support. You know you can have

friends of the family or uncles or somebody down the line that can help you with kinda like keep you on the right track, keep you focused, but the transition from prison back out of this society is so hard.

Mr. Blue/Green provided a rendition of a family structure already in place that helped him adjust back into society:

I came home, you know, to a good family. They were supportive, and I knew what I wanted to do, so that makes it a lot easier sometimes. People get out and be so happy to get out. They don't know what they want to do and still don't have a plan. But you know it made it easier for me. That's really what I call family structure. I have a good life partner who also helps me. Well, if anything, the relationships got stronger. But as I said, I had a good support system. During incarceration, my mother, you know, make sure my son's mother made sure I stayed in contact with my son, no negative vibes, and you know man, and I wouldn't tell him really what was going on because he was so young but yeah family always that's part of it.

Theme 6: "Holler and Heed"

Throughout the interview process, the participants, to some degree, felt an obligation to inform someone who would listen to their journeys of incarceration and post-incarceration. The following remain some poignant advice on desisting from crime.

Hands Up

Mr. Blue/Gray spearheaded the conversation on another form of surrender: the opportunity to share the reflections of life then and now with anyone who is open to listening, since the marginalized do not get readily call upon to speak:

Understand that nobody owes you anything, you are not entitled, and that was the biggest thing to me that made me say, you know, hey, I'm gonna open up my own business because nobody owes me a job. Nobody doesn't owe me the opportunity to be successful, but I do owe myself the opportunity to be successful, and I can make myself successful, so I think some people are getting out of prison they have to understand that you know nobody owes you anything about of entitled to anything but you can do better and you can make better decisions and keep God first and understand that the people you hurt may not just be yourself, it could be somebody that is really close to you or you never know- who or how, what you do may come back, and somebody else in your family. Keeps that in mind before you make decisions or after you did what you did as you try to transition back out to society because there's going to be a lot of obstacles, and there's going to be a lot of things that make you just want to give up, but at the end of the day you know to keep your head focused on where you are trying to go to and believe me you can be successful.

Reinvent Yourself

Mr. Blue/Green added to his self-change philosophy and the challenge of correctly continuing and successfully transitioning from incarceration back to the community:

Learn how to reinvent yourself because of the way statistics have you already calculated to go back. Do you have a plan of execution? That's number 1. The transition from me wasn't that bad financially because I had a good backbone, and then I had a solid structure. Mentally coming out wasn't that challenging for me. It was just that the focus of you have to do this on your own now, so let me focus on how to come up with something else to do that nobody can take away from you or limit you.

Mr. Blue/White also offered some seasoned instruction:

Man, take advantage of all the benefits they got for you now. Educate yourself, place yourself in a position to win, not lose, which means your environment, your friends, and your situation. You gonna have to. Your choices, man, make the right choices. It's gonna be your decision. It's your decision 100%. Whether you stay on the street or whether you're going back. You got to humble yourself.

Mr. Pink/White shared his final thoughts on dissenting from crime and how he would contribute to the society:

I just love to see young men man focus on what they need to focus on; they don't realize how much. Man, you talk about other ways to enjoy your life. You know, and not being like the cats that I know, I grew up with and stuff like, hey man, I

don't mess with you anymore. No, no, it ain't nothing like that we still cool, you know I'm saying, cuz we grew up again, but I don't do the things you do know more. Nobody is putting pressure on me. You know cuz they know I'm real. It's over. You don't try. Just because you don't get to a point, you still like looking down on them, no, because that was you one time and actually I still talk to a cat right now, Man, come-on you can't do this man you a 56 years old man, you still doing this?

Summary

Six significant themes (Big Motivation, Challenges, Living with Community Criminality, Inside-Out, Support Groups, Holler and Heed) and 21 subthemes emerged from the valuable sharing of experiences and perspectives of the participants of this study. The emerged subthemes are as follows:

- | | |
|-----------------------------|--|
| 1. Finding a Niche | 12. Seizing Accountability |
| 2. My Children | 13. Recognized, My Safe Haven |
| 3. No More Lost Time | 14. God faith-safe |
| 4. To Be a Family Man | 15. Mind My Business |
| 5. Patience and Endurance | 16. Prison-dehumanizing |
| 6. Strategies and Practices | 17. Psychological Factors |
| 7. Staying Alive | 18. Roll with it, coincide with everyone |
| 8. Beliefs and Attitudes | 19. Kindred Kindness |
| 9. Making Money | 20. Hands Up |

10. Detention Apprehension

21. Reinvent Yourself

11. Caution and Frustration

The above subthemes relate to the overall research questions that addressed how a marginal group of African American first-time former offenders have avoided becoming recidivists: for instance, what is it like to live their daily lives with the threat of being rearrested, and what success strategies were implemented to remain crimefree? The subthemes also addressed how the former first-time offenders desist from crime daily and how their human agency determinants contributed to their communities and self-efficacy.

Chapter 5 examines and analyzes the findings in comparison to the results yielded in the studies in Chapter 2. Also, I offer the limitations of the study, confirm the study's results, and provide implications that are needed for further research on former first-time offenders dissenting from crime.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative study was to identify the success strategies used by former offenders to desist from crime and avoid recidivism. The current research on former offenders primarily centers on recidivism. According to the 2014 report of the National Institute of Justice, the national recidivism rate ranged between 56% and 82%. A growing body of literature has discussed former offenders' experiences upon release (Alexander, 2013; Longley, 2019; & Wyse 2017), yet only a few studies have focused on the detailed lived experiences of former offenders who avoid recidivism. Considering the higher percentage in the above statistics as a gauge for effectiveness of reentry programs, it stands to reason that 12% of former offenders did not become recidivists. Consequently, I surmised that this gap in literature demands investigations of the successful strategies used by the former offenders who have spent a year or more free of recidivism and how these men successfully reintegrated into the community.

The overarching questions for this research were:

1. What is the lived experience of African American male (first-time) former offenders who succeed in resisting crime and avoiding recidivism?
2. How would an African American male (first-time) former offender describe his daily life desisting from crime?
3. What human agency determinants have changed with a crimefree lifestyle?

Framed by the above research questions, this study explored how the participants arrived at their decisions to stop committing crimes, their internal motivations, and the

external factors that led to ceasing from crime. According to Neubauer et al. (2019), the essentiality of phenomenology centers on the researcher exploring the event through the lens of those who lived it. Therefore, phenomenological approach was the best design for this study, which allowed me to investigate the participant's thoughts shared as forefront answers (direct quotes) to the salient questions during the research interview process.

There were similarities and differences between the investigated themes in the initial research and those that emerged in the final investigation. According to Lacourse et al. (2019), there is an inverse relationship between how former offenders cope with reentry and rearrests, which could be the reason for these disparities. Several themes that were discussed in Chapter 2 aligned with the themes emerged in the results: Self-actualization and Purpose in Chapter 2 aligns with Big Motivation chapter 4; Mental, Behavioral, Holistic Health aligns with Optimal Health; and Recovery Capital aligns with Support Groups. For example, self-actualization infers that the former offender has reached a maturation level within himself that his past criminal behavior is not worth the risks and sacrifices he had to face; he defines his future by showing others and himself that he has a new self-confidence and that he accepts the responsibility of his previous actions. He takes measures to be in control and is determined not to return to crime.

Key findings

As reported in Chapter 4, my key findings consist of six themes and a wealth of subthemes that address how these first-time former offenders were able to desist from crime daily, improve their self-efficacy, and contribute to their communities. The themes

and subthemes are given below with their associated themes (in parentheses) from the literature review in Chapter 2.

- Theme 1: Big Motivation (Self-actualization, Realization of Purpose)
Finding a Niche, My Children, No More Lost Time, To Be a Family Man, Patience and Endurance, Strategies and Practices, Staying Alive, Beliefs and Attitudes, Appreciating Freedom.
- Theme 2: Challenges (Challenges in Re-entry, External Obstacles)
Money, Apprehension Detention, Caution, and Frustration, Seizing Accountability.
- Theme 3: Living with Community Criminality
Recognized, My Safe Haven, God faith-safe, Mind My Business
- Theme 4: Inside Out (Mental Health)
Prison-dehumanizing, Parole/probation a notch under, Psychological Factors, Roll with it, Coincide with everyone
- Theme 5: Support Group (Recovery Capital)
Kindred Kindness
- Theme 6: Holler and Heed (Self-Efficacy?)
Reinvent Yourself

This chapter examines and clarifies these findings and compares them to the literature described in Chapter 2. Also, I discuss the limitations of the study, confirm the results, and provide implications that further research is needed on former first-time offenders dissenting from crime.

Interpretation of the Findings

The six main themes that emerged from the results are interpreted in this section, discussing how they compare with the main themes as reviewed in Chapter 2, and how they extend new knowledge in criminal desistance. This section also reviews how the theoretical framework aided in analyzing the study's findings.

Theme 1: Big Motivation (Self-actualization, Realization of Purpose)

The subthemes of Big Motivation revealed how multiple factors weighed heavily on the participants' mindset and how daily incentives such as children, wives, freedom, and the memory of the trauma of incarceration encouraged them to desist from crime. Robinson-Edwards and Pinkney (2018) explained how a former offender can desist from crime by eliminating selfishness as a survival maneuver for others in their lives, formulating a mindset that their life is not their own, and that everything they do affects their immediate and extended family.

The subtheme, Appreciating Freedom, is linked with the theme of Self-Actualization in Chapter 2. Appreciating freedom aided these former offenders to reach another level of self-actualization as they compared their time as an inmate and a free man. According to Lefevre (2019), former offenders who transitioned to work release programs in preparation for returning home fully appreciated their freedom. One inmate, now a former offender, said, "I'm working now, earning money to send home." The research showed that these former offenders took life for granted before entering prison, yet once released, they began to see the value of their civil rights and the opportunity freedom offers. Supporting Lefevre (2019), one participant described how he appreciated

the freedom of driving his car with the convertible top always down, as compared to living years inside a prison cell with no air or ventilation.

Another motivation for a former offender to remain a criminal dissident was the dreadful concept of making amends for lost time with family members (especially children). Kotova (2019) focusing on the separation of families during incarceration, explained how this absence continued to decrease family ties (short- and long-term) within the community. He further mentioned that the criminal justice system has to instinctively find ways for families and inmates to see each other to remedy the destructive scourge of separatism. In my study, the participant's facial expressions and body language displayed a grieving posture when such information pertaining to their families were presented. One of the questions inquired about the children's reaction to their father's incarceration and subsequent post incarceration life. I observed that their tone of voice changed in such instances, and they uttered softened words, signifying evidence of regret.

Theme 2: Challenges (External Obstacles, Challenges in Reentry)

This study confirms previous reports of the challenges that former offenders face, including finding employment and housing, inferiority complex, changing technological environments, broken families, and criminal arrest stigma (Chikadzi, 2017; Leasure & Stevens-Andersen, 2017). However, my findings fail to confirm Nelson and Trone (2016), who reported that a major portion of former offenders have difficulty finding housing after prison discharge. Also, Bahr (2015) wrote that housing instability adds to the stress of the former offender's challenge to remain crimefree. Accordingly, all

participants in my study had stable housing upon leaving prison due to inheritance, family members, and support systems, which can be considered as a factor that lessened their reentry burden.

Overcoming external obstacles is only a part of the stress of reestablishing a free life; the other part is recovering from the dehumanizing experience of incarceration. According to Ross (2020), post-incarceration traumatic effects include a generalized suspicion of everyone and a prison-institutional mindset that centers on a prison culture. Prison culture involves demonstrating the loss of privacy as well as living with the possibility of being killed or physically harmed. The study extended the knowledge of realistic shadowed threats of being rearrested and how that foreboding creates a fear factor in former offenders, their children, and family member's daily decisions regarding employment, housing, and community trust. This is addressed in-depth under Theme 4 below.

The external challenges faced by former offenders include subtle obstacles that hinder their progress towards stability, especially in securing a steady income. The results of this study confirm the findings of Paternoster et al. (2018) that not much has changed regarding the former offender's external obstacles. My findings regarding employment show that the subtleties of securing a job with a criminal past, (e.g., in demands for work history, references, identification, transportation) remain a haunting shadow. This confirms Weaver (2016), who also indicated that not solidifying gainful employment creates multiple hardships for the former offender. For instance, a former offender hired

by a corporate company in any industry is subjected to background checks, regardless of superb performance and time on the job.

Even though the re-entry obstacles have not drastically changed, society's empathy toward former offenders has. As shown by Moak et al. (2019) by simulating scenarios of former offender's lives, participants were able to witness former offenders humanized and to have an understanding of the harsh reality of the criminal justice system on victims, former offenders, and both sets of families. Moreover, according to Sawyer and Wagner (2020), the criminal justice hierarchy is fragmented with multiple jurisdictions between state and federal influences, with no central criminal justice agency to maintain national consistency.

Theme 3: Community Criminality

When asked how safe they felt in their former criminal environment, participants typically replied that they felt comfortable since they understood very well that this community lives in poverty and a crime can happen anytime. Their responses revealed that they (former offenders) have developed an ability to discern the criminal activities more quickly than the general public through the experience and perspectives they have gained before prison, during serving their time in prison, and living outside of prison. In other words, these men have gained a unique awareness that the average person may remain clueless to regarding the thoughts and actions of a former criminal who has turned his life around.

This unique awareness of how the economics, politics, criminality, and law enforcement work in drug trades, as well as their understanding of poverty,

homelessness, and lack of educational opportunities could be used to contribute to their community as activists, or advocates to change policies with the political stakeholders and local leadership. According to Maruna (2017), a community advocate is linked to having a better life purpose and discovering opposing forces between criminality and community activism. This finding suggests that desisting from crime and advocacy work can be collaborated to help former offenders align with themselves as community members and prosocial mutual causes. A participant of my study aligned with Maruna's (2019) finding mentioning that not only was he attending a church that changed his life and circumstances but that he was working within the church, making a difference as a deacon with responsibilities to the congregation.

The above participant's response equally places emphasis on the cruciality of the faith-based initiatives within the communities that help strengthen former offenders and their families transition from prison to a regular life. According to Edwards and Kewley (2018), the participants in the faith based programs have multiple identity narratives (e.g., forgiveness, understanding, and counselor-preacher narratives that show that no one-size-fits-all model works). Moreover, the faith-based communities are open to adapting to the needs of their clients. This community sharing within the faith-based establishment significantly helped the former offenders steer themselves toward a better life in their respective communities.

The findings also show how these men can positively infiltrate marginal neighborhoods and the general community to negotiate for funding, housing, and employment with leadership. These men have evolved through their hardships to become

community advocates, social activists, and community leaders. According to my study, one participant uses his business space as a haven for men to safely come together, discuss community problems, and find solutions to those problems. In another example two participants mentioned that they use their own businesses to hire other former offenders within their industry and mentor them to become entrepreneurs and self-reliant. My data suggests that these former offenders can be trained as direct community organizers based on their past narratives. This community advocacy position helps former offenders inform the public about the daily life of the underserved, undiscovered, and underappreciated voices who may have similar circumstances. Their decision and actions to cease from criminality place them in positions for positive social change and provide them with socioeconomic community support strategies.

Theme 4: Inside-Out (Mental Health)

An inquisitive observation during the data analysis was that even though the interview questions focused on life after prison and strategies for remaining crime-free, the participants frequently referred to their life in prison. Their incarcerated life experience had such a dire effect on their lives that it was difficult for them to separate where they were and where they are now. All of them explained how morally dehumanized a person becomes in an incarcerated environment as if they were caged animals. According to Lee (2018), animals kept in locked, isolated, and repetitious living environments devoid of (positive) social interaction yield to bouts of despondency. Not surprisingly, men who have spent time in prison become in need of analysis and treatment because the prison experience does not end with their release from prison

(Tadros et al., 2020). Post-incarceration adjustment involves living with the emotional impact of the trauma and the stigma of incarceration. These challenges then get filtered into a family, housing, and employment decisions in post-incarceration. In other words, reentering society in post-incarceration is not as simple as it may seem. Without the deliberate support of loved ones and mental health professionals, former offenders are uniquely challenged in their mental health conditions.

The theme, *Inside Out*, indirectly correlates with the mental health subthemes mentioned in previous research. According to Niehorster et al. (2019), psychological stress produces sensory systems within the body and mind which can be stimulated through bad memories. Therefore, subconsciously the stress level can manifest itself through neurological or physical systems triggered by anxiousness and fearfulness. In and of itself, it would be severely limiting for a former offender to systematically underpin his daily existence on those threats. As pointed out by Ward and Merlo (2016), former offenders continue referring to their lives as offenders while incarcerated. This vacillating mindset was evident with my participants, suggesting that their challenge to forego the past is not an easy maneuver to undertake without therapeutic intervention.

One of the questions posed during the interview addressed the participant's relationship with themselves and their self-esteem. All the participants reported that nothing was wrong with them, and they were functioning well. However, I surmised that their answers were not entirely forthcoming and that they seemed unwilling to show any vulnerability in their answers they considered to be less manly, which marks a man inside prison as weak and thus vulnerable to predators.

Theme 5: Support Groups (Recovery Capital)

An important theme explored through the previously published literature was Recovery Capital. Chen (2017) explained that Recovery Capital refers to an aggregate of resources needed to sincerely aid in the desistance and overall recovery of former offenders. Connolly and Granfield (2017) reported that a former offender's quality of life is one of the central ingredients of recovery capital. Once released and determined to lead a life of criminal desistance, it is a former offender's best interest to seek ways to contribute to the community, maintain accountability actions, and move toward political, economic, social, and environmental achievements.

Parole officers play an important role in supporting former offenders succeed in their post-incarceration lives. According to Bares and Mowen (2020), parole officers offer interpersonal and professional support for the former offender regarding access to resources and social services that may be elusive from the traditional family support. Also, the parole officer is a person of accountability and can listen to and understand the challenges faced by those who are adjusting to desisting from crime.

These significant stakeholders (parole officers) in a former offender's life consistently assist them in adjusting to a crimefree life while on parole. According to Doekhie et al. (2018), parolee files indicated that the more committed parole officers were to the former offenders, the higher the chances of the former offenders aligning with criminal desistance. The authors suggested that the experienced parole officers knew how to gauge the former offender's plight circumstances and were open to providing second chances and warnings as a deterrent for minor parole violations instead of having the

former offender rearrested. Moreover, in their study, former offenders did not mention completely aligning themselves with the parole officer as they would align themselves with social workers, mentors, and other support personnel. The reluctance to align with the parole officer by the former offender stems from the parole officer's hierarchical power to return them to prison because of minor infractions (Doekhie et al., 2018). In terms of my study, few if any, mentioned a parole officer as an ally during their transition to the community. Moreover, one participant stated that the parole officer highly suggested the possibility of him becoming a recidivist. Even though the parole officer stated that it would only be a matter of time before he returned to prison, but he proved that wrong.

Participants revealed that support groups were their oasis. These support groups included family members as well as people who offered encouragement and refused to judge them based on their history. Confirming the findings of Paternoster et al. (2015), who reported that significant others (spouse/children) play essential roles in helping former offenders turn toward a crimefree lifestyle, the powerful influence of family as a support group in motivating the former offender emerged as a sub-theme in my study. Similarly, Hlavk et al. (2015) reported that desisting from crime and avoiding recidivism are attributable to former offenders reaching maturity levels and viewing themselves not as criminals but as fathers, husbands, sons, ministers, and brothers. My findings are in perfect alignment with Connolly and Granfield (2017), as they found that a part of recovery capital centered on people and the resources to help change their lives. Social support creates a balance in the former offender's life and offers an array of resources

(short-term housing, employment skills, educational opportunities) to help them in criminal desistance.

The support groups provided the ideal family structure and the stability that many former offenders were not familiar with. The idea of a routine, such as a home, food in the refrigerator, children, jobs with benefits, and the camaraderie of coworkers offered a glimpse of normalcy, albeit perhaps, that was not in their households. This provides a perspective that the former offender can use as a reference point, something to aspire to.

Theme 6: Holler and Heed (Self Efficacy?)

The theme "Holler and Heed" represents a finding which is not directly found in previous research – participants' willingness to offer sage advice about their journey through prison and post-incarceration. To illustrate further, one participant explained that he always steered his conversation to anyone who would listen, advocating that when they keep God first, better decisions can be made. All participants reported taking advantage of the opportunity to educate themselves and coming to realize that their daily choices matter whether they become a recidivist or not. For them, desisting from crime and contributing back to the community remained a priority.

As noted in Theme 5, the former offender's desistance behavior, underpinned by experience within the criminal justice system, makes him an expert – someone who can dispense his wisdom to other former offenders and to the community he once abused. According to Nixon (2020), utilizing former offenders to advise current or former offenders is not a policy that finds favor within all criminal justice circles. In fact, collaboration among former offenders is often forbidden. There are evidence-based

programs, such as faith-based programs that promote and help former offenders' community reentry, but federal, state, and local policies discourage former offenders from collaborating outside of surveillance.

All the former offenders were pleasantly intrigued that I asked to interview them for the study. It was as if they were vaulted to celebrity status because of their former misdeeds. The final interview question asked whether they had concluding remarks for the pending and newly released former offenders. Some of the responses revealed that they have found peace within themselves and a joy that dominates their thoughts. They were determined to never subject themselves to being incarcerated again under any circumstance, and they were proud to convey those experiences and realizations to those who would listen. According to Nixon (2020), this is a type of relational support for other former offenders and those who want to use their stories of overcoming and succeeding in desisting from crime to inspire people in general. This form of mutual connections between former offenders and the newly released (although monitored by law enforcement officials) create an opportunity for the former offender to help law enforcement authorities combat recidivism through their criminal dissent narratives.

The fact that these former offenders are willing to share their sage advice speaks volumes to those who would listen. The insight bestowed suggested that as criminals they plundered from the society and the taxpayers had to bear the cost of their incarceration. Now, as former offenders, they desire to make amends by helping other young men and women who may view them as quasi role models because they were once incarcerated. Sharing their testimonies about reentry and success beyond prison remains an opportunity

for the former offender to make amends, referencing their dissenting lives from crime, recovery, and becoming a community asset instead of a liability.

Guidance and training could be provided for the former offenders who are willing to share this perspective with the community, so that they can have a professional qualification to approach a larger community. Harper (2007) suggested the value of vocational correction training programs that demonstrate a holistic approach to help former offenders incorporate a psychosocial aspect upon their community reentry. According to Caldwell (2020), ‘purpose’ and ‘motivation’ are linked to discovering a person's song that propels them upward and onward in conjunction with sharing that song with others. Prior to incarceration, former offenders assaulted the society with their crimes; now, by returning home, they can give back (time, talents, and testimony) to help someone avoid their mistakes, while simultaneously taking their minds off of their circumstances and focusing on replenishing the society.

The role of Desistance Theory in This Study

The theoretical framework for this study was desistance theory (DT). As an all-encompassing theory that concentrates on the diverse aspects of former offenders desisting from crime, desistance theory provides a foundation to analyze these aspects from a broader perspective. Desistance theory is rooted in the works of several theorists from 1993-2008 including Sampson and Laub (1993, 2003, 2008), Maruna (2001), and Giordano (2002). Cid and Marti (2012) explained desistance theory as the overall desistance catalyst that made or kept a former offender from becoming a recidivist. According to Serin and Lloyd (2009), the authenticity of someone who has remained

crimefree is established by consistent stages of desistance, which include self-identity, a legitimate source of income, and his contribution to the community.

Some people age out of criminal behavior as they leave adolescence and young adulthood, relishing the events and responsibilities of an adult life. According to Maruna (2017), criminal desistance is not a one-size-fits-all design but is an ongoing investigation of people who have ceased from crime. Criminal desistance is supplemented by a positive aggregate of actions that fill former offenders' lives with purpose and fulfillment, leaving their former lives in their past. Utilizing DT as the framework of my study helped me align the research questions with the findings, establish the essential themes, and offer my interpretations.

Limitations

The study's limitations were exclusively attributed to African American males who were 25 years of age or older. Previous research suggested that former offenders younger than 25 years were more vulnerable to being rearrested because of the low level of maturation compared to those at the age of 25 or older. The 25 and older former offenders considered the consequences of their actions more so than their younger counterparts (Katsiaficas et al., 2014). The study did not involve women, nor did the study interview recidivists (repeat offenders). The limitations also extended to regional areas within less than a 100-mile radius within the Augusta, Georgia area. I did not include the adjoining state of South Carolina, to where recruiting was extended, but to no avail. The study had limited guidelines to one past felony conviction and former offenders who had been out of prison for a year or more with no rearrests since their

released date. Finally, because of early Covid-19 restrictions, I conducted face-to-face interviews with the participants wearing masks during the conversations. We practiced social distance parameters as I kept the audio recording devices on the table and posed questions from six feet apart.

Recommendations for Further Research

Based on the research findings, I would present two main recommendations: First, it is recommended that criminal justice researchers evaluate the long-term advantages and disadvantages of vocational training in prison to prepare inmates for community reentry. The second recommendation is to conduct more research to identify the laws that permanently restrict the financial and psychological growth of the former offenders, who are being released to the community on a daily basis.

Research on Vocational Training During Incarceration

The vitality of recognizing the potential of vocational training programs and how they can contribute to a sustainable community transition for the former offenders cannot be stressed enough. I understand the purpose of big business, including the Prison Industrial Complex (PIC), to keep stockholders' dividends climbing by sustaining recidivism. In other words, maintaining this big business involves continually keeping the prison official salaries, pensions, and local businesses thriving by building more prisons, placing more restrictions on probation and parole guidelines to escalate the local and state economies, and sustaining the flow of recidivism. However, I believe that the PIC officials need to consider the children, families, and the communities of these men and women who are incarcerated. They need to rethink or alter some business practices that

could change the course of history and allow each newly released former offender to gain a skill that fosters independence from the criminal justice system. The current PIC status quo manifests into generations of children growing up sporadically without a father or a mother. Some communities have accepted the adage that "prison is a rite of passage," and is knowledgeable of someone or has an incarcerated family member.

Right now, America is on the cusp of change as a result of varied economic, psychosocial repercussions of Covid-19, health inequity, a new administration, and prison reform. In order to remain ahead of change, especially in business, it could be a great time to spearhead the drive to teach and train a viable workforce. Former offenders who were once a liability to the community can become assets to the family, community, and the nation.

Especially during a global pandemic such as Covid-19, where many who are not former offenders lost their jobs, having trained viable skills for community reentry for a former offender is truly a lifesaver. Nayer et al. (2020) confirmed that it is difficult enough to secure a job during these stressful times for anyone and if a former offender has some technical or vocational skill, they can secure an income for their family and have a semi successful reentry. The authors explained that the state, local, and governmental corrections place stress on former offenders to secure employment to prevent probation violations in addition to paying restitution. Parsons (2017) wrote that subtle skills gained by former offenders with job training and mastering an employable skill have the ability to help the de-stigmatization of former offenders; for example, a community skill such as cooking offers a prosocial-identity (self-pride moments) when

the former offender interacts with the community. Therefore, those who are still inside the prison walls should be encouraged to pursue job skill retraining because learning a useful skill provides them with a second chance to live a better life when they leave the prison. It could transform their criminal mindset to that of a productive citizen, not just a former offender, but as someone who can contribute to multiple communities.

Preparing prisoners for reentry raises the debate about punishment versus rehabilitation. According to Atkin-Plunk (2020), a reexamination of strictly punishing policies for violent crimes considering mental and current psychosocial circumstances is needed. The author further explained that a balanced justice approach to all crimes involves positive rehabilitation with evidence-based success programs that are geared toward changing the individual overall, without continuous punitive advocacy. In other words, while the inmates are "doing time," as a part of their sentencing, they can be required to attend and complete mandatory entrepreneurial training programs as well as other retraining and skill-building programs throughout their sentence.

These programs can include the same paid-job-related skills and taking part in such courses can be made compulsory so that all inmates attend and maintain their work schedules. Creating a workforce and improving their work-related skills can be easily aligned with incarcerated individuals, which can be an effective solution to the lack of skilled employees in many industries. In this manner, the incarcerated not only receive support from the state, local, or federal correctional resources as an inmate or a ward of the court, but also can still be obligated to the state or big business after their release with opportunities for gainful employment and viable living wages. Such a trained workforce

is certainly prepared for independence outside of the prison walls to dissipate the recidivist traffic flow. Without the efforts to train this marginal community for job growth in various industries, the correctional environments remain at the mercy of poverty, crime, and low academic achievements.

Research on Financially and Psychologically Restricting Laws

It is also recommended that research is needed at a local, state, and federal level to examine which laws permanently restrict the financial and psychosocial growth of former offenders who are being released every day. This study clearly shows that former offenders have an intimate knowledge of these laws, and of ways to make an easier transition into the community; they understand how financial and societal resources can be used in ways that do not distract from community resources. Therefore, former offenders, their families, and the society can sustain without restrictions in housing, employment, and civil rights.

Finally, researchers should be working with prisons and parole officers to test out training programs for offenders (inside and out of prisons), to help them live productive and crimefree lives after release. Moreover, one particular policy that has to be discussed amongst correctional officials and criminal justice authorities is the concept of not having former offenders fraternize with other former offenders. According to Binnall (2019), the blanket theory that any kind of associations between former offenders within the community is a cause for concern should be revisited by criminal correctional policy makers. The author explained that the perpetuation of those theories gives rise to the notion that all former offenders once aligned with other former offenders will return to

lives of crime and threaten the society. Yet, many previous studies and my study showed evidence that there are former offenders who have successfully desisted from crime and are more than willing to share their strategies, tips, and advice with the newly released former offenders. The former offenders who have turned their lives around after their release and now serving the community can be considered as the best source of inspiration for the newly released. Thus, the blanket theory needs to be revisited and reformed accordingly.

Social Change Implications

My study offers suggestive evidence that there is a marginal group of people within the community of former offenders who do not return to prison despite the suggestion of previous literature that most former offenders assuredly become recidivists. My study supports the argument for a social change mindset for individuals who either were newly or previously released from prison. These former offenders had only one incident with the law, served their time, and did not return to prison. The successful strategies these former offenders utilized to desist from crime can also positively impact their family members. The daily witnessing of how the former offender is actively demonstrating positive behaviors is conducive to being a change agent for themselves, their children, and community stakeholders is newsworthy.

Furthermore, by sharing the known strategies of criminal desistence as evidence from the study's results, correctional and legislative organizations can implement local post-incarceration policies. These policies may involve locating successful former offenders who can help create ideal programs and share significant input to assist former

offenders in adjusting to reentry. Many of the programs need former offenders' input and correspondence with the current inmates to discover what ideally works. These success strategies help the pending former offenders reach the short and long-term goal of dissenting from crime. However, if an amendment to the policy would allow (adhering to all the criminal justice requirements) proven successful former offenders to align with other paid criminal reform professionals, the dual guidance and mentoring of these advocates could create a positive change for the newly released former offender.

During these interviews, I discovered that these African American former offenders, who have successfully transitioned back into society, do not refer to themselves as former offenders, ex-cons, ex-felons, or felons. Most see those titles as labels that perpetuate a stereotype and that the public, especially American citizens, can laud over them. In that sense, the title 'returning citizens' is less threatening and more conducive to a positive social change, as it allows already a marginal group of people to view themselves positively and enables others in the community to examine their perceptions regarding returning citizens through a new lens.

Conclusion

The overarching findings of the study reveal that former offenders who desist from crime find ways to reinvent themselves as entrepreneurs. These men use their former experiences to speak to young and older people about the ravages of a criminal life and present themselves as dissenters from crime: they use their influence in the community to help organize various services, and work with local leadership who are advocating for public concerns.

Moreover, the findings express how appreciative the former offenders (or returning citizens) are of the concept of freedom and being able to commune with their children and family members without the restrictions of a prison cell. Despite the challenges of living a criminal desisting life, these returning citizens have found purpose and peace within themselves. They would not jeopardize their progress and become a recidivist, because what they have gained outweighs their losses.

This study's findings also illustrate the need to reexamine the most vital stakeholders and the successful strategies needed to help former first-time offenders upon community reentry. Those vital stakeholders are the marginal group of people within the community of former offenders who committed one crime, did their time, and did not return to prison. This study explored what this selected group of onetime former offenders do daily to successfully survive in multiple environments, enhancing the African American male former offender's chances of avoiding recidivism. The strategic methods they used as tools to motivate themselves included the choice to not to lose any more time with children/spouses, and realization of the gifts of freedom - God/Church,

education opportunities and job offers. Despite encountering challenges identical to those faced by the recidivists, they still chose to desist from crime. Therefore, they are a vital asset for the newly releasing former offenders to start a new, crimefree life.

Finally, I discovered that it is important for the community and for the public to change the terminology they use to refer to these African American former offenders, who have successfully transitioned back into society. They no longer refer to themselves as former offenders, ex-cons, ex-felons, or felons. Most see those titles as labels that perpetuate a stereotype. They felt that the title 'returning citizens' is less threatening and more suitable to positive social change, as it allows already a marginal group of people to view themselves positively and allows the community to see them as contributing citizens.

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Appendix A: Recruitment Poster

GETTING OUT; STAYING OUT!

WHAT: EXPLAIN HOW YOU
MANAGED TO STAY OUT.

OCT/NOV-2020,
90 minutes Zoom/Webex or
Meeting in Georgia or South
Carolina

RESEARCH
STUDY:
VOLUNTEERS
NEEDED AND
PAID!

AFRICAN
AMERICAN
MALES.

Ages: 25 and up.

FORMER OFFENDERS
WHO ARE NOT REPEAT
OFFENDERS AND ARE
NOT ON PROBATION OR
PAROLE.

My Walden University
Student Dissertation
Study on

REENTRY,
REDUCING,
RECIDIVISM, &
REMAINING
CRIME-FREE.

Contact: J. Hines
xxx-xxx xxx or (my
university email)
(Sole Researcher)

Appendix B: Interview Questions

Aging, Life Stability, Narrative Script, Social Identity, Controversies

1. What is it like being an African American male former offender?
2. Describe what was like to transition from incarceration back to the community?
3. How does the threat of being rearrested affect what you do every day?
4. Could you describe your goals after leaving prison, and how have they changed?
Do you anticipate them evolving as you get older?
5. Do you believe there is a stigma associated with your incarceration?
6. How safe to you feel around criminal environments within communities?
7. What sort of temptations existed that might have drawn you back into a life of crime?
8. Can you describe your employment situation since you've been out? How has incarceration affected your ability to get a job?
9. Can you describe how your family and friends played a role during your incarceration and since you've been out? Did these relationships change when you came home and if so, how?
10. If you have children, could you describe how your incarceration affected their lives?
11. How do you feel about your self-esteem when things get rough?
12. Describe how you make decisions about criminal opportunities come up?

13. Describe your involvement with support groups or church as a means to helping you avoid incarceration.
14. If you had to identify your biggest motivator to remaining out of jail/prison, what would that be and why?
15. Is there anything else you want to add that would be beneficial for others to know?

Appendix C: Informed Consent

Successful Strategies of African American Males to Avoid Recidivism

The Researcher

My name is Jeff Hines, and I am a Ph.D. student at Walden University. I am researching African American men who have done time in prison once and did not go back to prison. This form is part of a process called "informed consent" to allow you to understand this study before deciding if you want to participate. You can have a printed copy of the informed consent form for your records if you want it.

The Research

I want to gain knowledge into how African American males succeed in not becoming a repeat offender. There is a high repeat offender rate with African American males; however, a small percentage of African American males who commit a crime do their prison-time and do not go back to prison for any reason. In this research, I will interview about twelve former offenders who (1) identify as African American men, (2) who are 25 years old or older, and (3) have stayed off-paper (no probation, or parole), and ask them how they remain free, not returning to prison when so many others are going back inside. I intend that documenting your experience of staying out of prison will help others to do the same thing.

The Process

Your participation in the study will involve an interview with an estimated length of 90 minutes. You have the right to take as much time as needed to read the inform-consent form, to reach an understanding, and you can also ask me any questions before the study begins about your role in the study. You are the expert, I am learning from you. , and In the interview, I will be asking you questions so I can be clear on what life is like as a former offender who is also not a repeat offender, and who remains free. For example, here are two of the interview questions:

* Is there anything you want to share that would be beneficial to other former offenders that are being released?

* What is it like being an African American male former offender?

Research should only be done with those who freely volunteer. So, everyone will respect your decision to be interviewed or not. You will be treated the same whether or not you join the study. If you enter the study now, you can still change your mind later. Also, if you decide to leave the interview at any time, for any reason, that is not a problem. I will understand that it won't affect your chance of getting any social services or access to other resources.

The interview will be audiotaped for later interpretation, and I will also take notes to make sure I did not miss anything you said during the interview. After the interview, I will send you a printed summary of what you said for your records. I will also ask whether I was correct in summarizing our conversation and if there is more you want to say. Finally, if you want, I will send a copy of the final study to your permanent records address. You will receive a \$10 Walmart gift card as a thank you for volunteering in the study.

All information collected will be confidential; that means your name will not be attached to anything that is said, and your name will not be stated anywhere within the final study. The information will be stored in a locked cabinet with one key held by me. After five years, the information will be destroyed. The information will be used for this research only.

Finally, you should remember not to reveal any information that relates to any past or present crime; it's none of my business, and, if you do, I may have to tell the police. I am focusing on how you can be successful after prison when many other African American males go back to prison.

Risk

This study poses little to no threat to the volunteers, other than recalling events that lead to your arrest, conviction, prison time, and remembering the people affected by the crime. The study may cause you minor discomforts but no more than you might experience in everyday life. If you become upset, you should contact the mental health emergency hotline (1-888-914-0810), and, again, you have the right to leave the interview at any time.

This study offers no direct benefits to you individually. I aim is to help new former offenders (just getting out) when they hit the streets, home, or work. Your truthful answers can possibly help change some of the rules and programs, or perhaps help raise the money for social service resources that serve the community.

Questions

If you have any general questions about the research, you can contact me at xxx-xxx-xxx. If you want to talk privately about your rights as a participant or any negative part of the study, you can call Walden University's Research Participant Advocate at email irb@mail.waldenu.edu.

The Walden University's approval number for this study is (IRB will enter their number here), and it expires on (IRB will enter the expiration date.)

Consent

If you understand the study, and wish to volunteer, please indicate your consent by signing.

Printed Name of Participant Date

Participant's Signature Date

Researcher's Signature